

Sri Ramana Maharshi

"Jnana is given neither from outside nor from another person. It can be realised by each and everyone in his own Heart. The jnana Guru of everyone is only the Supreme Self that is always revealing its own truth in every Heart through the being-consciousness 'I am, I am.' The granting of true knowledge by him is initiation into jnana. The grace of the Guru is only that Self-awareness that is one's own true nature. It is the inner consciousness by which he is unceasingly revealing his existence. This divine upadesa is always going on naturally in everyone."

-Sri Ramana Maharshi

David Godman was born in Stoke-on-Trent, England, in 1953. While he was attending Oxford University in the early 70s he found himself being attracted to the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi. In 1976 he traveled to India, intending to make a brief visit to Ramana Maharshi's ashram. He is still there twenty-six years later. After a period of intense meditation that lasted almost two years (1976-8) he started and ran the ashram's library, leaving it in 1985 to devote himself to writing and research. He has now published eleven books on Ramana Maharshi, his teachings and his direct disciples. More books are on the way.

Thanks to the President of Sri Ramanasramam for permission to reproduce photos of Bhagavan, his devotees and his ashram.

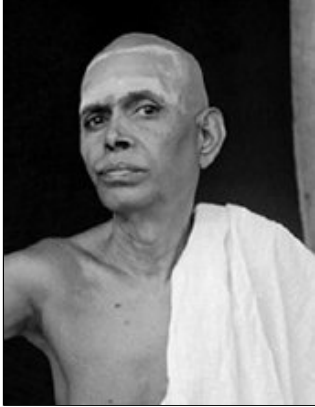
An Interview with David Godman

By Rob Sacks for Realization.org

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(This interview appeared originally on

<http://www.realization.org/>)



Sri Ramana Maharshi

David Godman is best known for his anthology of Ramana Maharshi's writings, *Be As You Are*, which has become a popular reference on the great sage's teachings. But few people know that David has written nine other reference books, and each one is equally remarkable in its own way. Two of these books have just come out, providing a good excuse for an interview. Since David lives in Tiruvannamalai and the editor of this website lives in New York, the interview was conducted by e-mail.

RS: You have just brought out two new books on Ramana Maharshi. Can you tell me something about them?

DG: In the late 1980s I began to collect first-person accounts by people who had spent time with Ramana Maharshi. It was my intention to make an anthology of accounts that hadn't been published before. To find original material I did extensive research on books that had appeared in various Indian languages but not in English. I also found some good material written in English that had never been published.

At some point during this research I went to see Annamalai Swami, a devotee of Sri Ramana who had moved intimately with him for many years. His account proved to be so interesting and so long, I ended up doing a whole book just about him. Then I went to Lucknow to interview Papaji. His story fascinated me so much, I spent four years in Lucknow and eventually wrote a massive 1,200 page biography. The original project got put on the back burner, and I only came back to it about a year ago.

I have changed my original criteria. I am now using some material that has been published before. However, since most of this material is rarely sold outside India, I think non-Indian readers of these books, even devotees of Sri Ramana, will find that most of the material is new to them.

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[Dutch Translation](#) of this interview by Peter Roosendaal



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Annamalai Swami



Papaji

RS: What made you decide to take this particular approach to Sri Ramana?

DG: Sri Ramana is all things to all people. There is no standard Ramana Maharshi who is the same for all people. People who approached him brought their minds with them, and Bhagavan, being a non-person with no mind of his own, magnified and reflected back all this incoming mental energy. So, different people saw him and experienced him in many different ways.

If I wanted to write about Sri Ramana myself, I would have to put my own editorial overlay on top of all these differing experiences and impressions. So, I thought, "Let people speak for themselves. Let people explain who their particular Ramana is."

There is a fictional detective, Hercule Poirot, who appears in many of Agatha Christie's books. In one story, when he was completely stuck, he just started talking to everyone who was involved, and spent many hours just listening to what they had to say. Poirot's theory was, "If you let people talk about themselves for long enough, sooner or later they give themselves away."

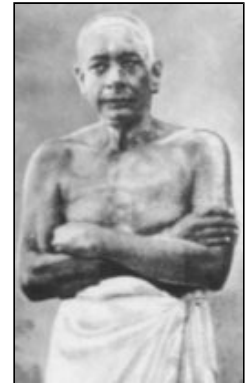
This was my approach. I didn't want to edit or shorten anyone's story. On the contrary, I wanted to make it as detailed as possible. So, I just let them talk and say what they wanted to say. If you give someone thirty pages to talk or write about their relationship with Sri Ramana, they have to reveal who they are in a very intimate way. This was my aim: to have a gallery of intimate portraits of Sri Ramana, each one drawn lovingly by a person who had a personal and very unique perspective on this great being.

RS: Could you describe one of your favorite sections from either of these books?

DG: When I made the first drafts of some of these chapters back in the 1980s, I circulated copies to all my friends in Tiruvannamalai. I asked everyone to give marks out of ten on how interesting they found each account. Some chapters that were given ten by one person would get zero from someone else. This illustrates what I was just saying: everyone has a different idea of who Sri Ramana is, and because people relate to him in different ways, they react differently to stories about him. My favorites were not so popular with many of my friends.

It's fashionable nowadays to be very positive about one's spiritual experiences. People like to jump up and down and exclaim, "I'm free! I'm free!" I prefer the refreshing honesty of a devotee, Sivaprakasam Pillai, who, after fifty years of being with Sri Ramana, was still lamenting about his faults and his lack of progress. This is the person who first got Bhagavan to record his teachings on self-enquiry in 1901. I admired his honesty, his humility and his integrity in admitting that he still couldn't control his mind. I also enjoyed some of the teachings of Sri Ramana that were recorded by Sadhu Natanananda, whose account also proved to be not too popular with my friends. This is an extract that I particularly liked:

A certain lady who had a lot of devotion performed a traditional ritual for worshipping sages whenever she



Sivaprakasam Pillai



Sadhu Natanananda

came into Bhagavan's presence to have *darshan*. She would prostrate to Bhagavan, touch his feet and then put the hands that had touched Bhagavan's feet on her eyes. After noticing that she did this daily, Bhagavan told her one day, 'Only the Supreme Self, which is ever shining in your heart as the reality, is the *Sadguru*. The pure awareness, which is shining as the inward illumination "I", is his gracious feet. The contact with these [inner holy feet] alone can give you true redemption. Joining the eye of reflected consciousness [*chidabhasa*], which is your sense of individuality [*jiva bodha*], to those holy feet, which are the real consciousness, is the union of the feet and the head that is the real significance of the word "*asi*" ["are", as in the *mahavakya* "You are That"]. As these inner holy feet can be held naturally and unceasingly, hereafter, with an inward-turned mind, cling to that inner awareness that is your own real nature. This alone is the proper way for the removal of bondage and the attainment of the supreme truth.'

I appreciate and applaud anyone who has devotion to Bhagavan's form, but at the same time I love the purity of Bhagavan's advaitic response to this woman.

RS: Can we backtrack a little? Can you tell me something about your own background some details of your family and how you came to be interested in Ramana Maharshi?

DG: I was born in 1953 in Stoke-on-Trent, a British city of about 300,000, located about halfway between Birmingham and Manchester. My father was a schoolmaster and my mother was a physiotherapist who specialised in treating physically handicapped children. Both of my parents are dead. I have one sister who is a year older than me. She is a former professional mountaineer who now teaches mountain and wilderness skills and occasionally leads groups to exotic and inaccessible places. My younger sister, now 43, teaches in a college in England, although nowadays she apparently spends most of her time monitoring the competence of other teachers, which I assume doesn't make her very popular.

I was educated at local schools and in 1972 won a place at Oxford University, where I did very little academic work, but had an enormous amount of fun. Sometime in my second year there I found myself getting more and more interested in Eastern spiritual traditions. I seemed to have an insatiable hunger for knowledge about them that resulted in massive bookstore bills, which I couldn't really afford, but not much satisfaction. Then, one day, I took home a copy of Arthur Osborne's *The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi in his Own Words*. Reading Ramana's words for the first time completely silenced me. My mind stopped asking questions, and it abandoned its search for spiritual information. It somehow knew that it had found what it was looking for.

I have to explain this properly. It wasn't that I had found a new set of ideas that I believed in. It was more of an experience in



With my father in a vintage 1930s car.
(Click on image to enlarge)



Younger sister Megan on an American whale-watching boat.
(Click on image to enlarge)



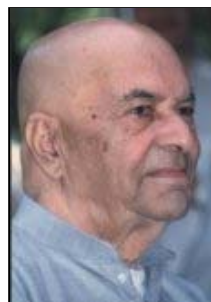
With my elder sister

which I was pulled into a state of silence. In that silent space I knew directly and intuitively what Ramana's words were hinting and pointing at. Because this state itself was the answer to all my questions, and any other questions I might come up with, the interest in finding solutions anywhere else dropped away. I suppose I must have read the book in an afternoon, but by the time I put it down it had completely transformed the way I viewed myself and the world.

The experiences I was having made me understand how invalid were the academic techniques of acquiring and evaluating knowledge. I could see that the whole of academia was based on some sort of reductionism: separating something big into its little component parts, and then deriving conclusions about how the "big something" really worked. It's a reasonable approach for comprehending mechanical things, such as a car engine, but I understood - and knew by direct experience - that it was a futile way of gaining an understanding of oneself and the world we appear to be in. When I went through my academic textbooks after having these experiences, there was such a massive resistance both to their contents and to the assumptions that lay behind them, I knew I could no longer even read them, much less study them in order to pass exams. It wasn't an intellectual judgement on their irrelevance, it was more of a visceral disgust that physically prevented me from reading more than a few lines. I dropped out in my final year at Oxford, went to Ireland with my Ramana books, and spent about six months reading Ramana's teachings and practicing his technique of self-inquiry. I had just inherited a small amount from my grandmother so I didn't need to work that year. I rented a small house in a rural area, grew my own food, and spent most of my time meditating. This was 1975. At the end of that year my landlady reclaimed her house and I went to Israel. I wanted to go somewhere sunny and warm for the winter, and then return to Ireland the following spring. I worked on a kibbutz on the Dead Sea and while I was there decided I could have a quick trip to India and [Ramanasramam](#) before I went back to Ireland. I figured out the costs and realised I couldn't afford it unless another 200 appeared from somewhere. I decided that if Bhagavan wanted me to go to India, he would send me the money. Within a week I received a letter from my grandmother's lawyer saying that he had just found some shares that she owned, and that my share of them would be 200. I came to India, expecting to stay six weeks, and have been here more or less ever since.

Geraldine and her partner Dave on the west coast of Ireland.

[\(Click on image to enlarge\)](#)



Papaji

For more information about Papaji, please go to:

<http://www.poonja.com/>

RS: I've always wondered about your name. Is Godman your birth name or did you change it?

DG: It's my family name. I never had any desire to take a new name, and no one has ever tried to give me one.

RS: You said that you spent six months practicing self-inquiry based on your reading of Sri Ramana's books. Were you able to get a good understanding of the method from your reading? I ask because this seems to be difficult for most people. Did you need to modify your understanding later when you went to Sri Ramanasramam?

DG: I did find it hard to practise self-inquiry merely by reading books simply because I did not have access to much material. I had at that time only managed to find Arthur Osborne's three books on Ramana. Though they explained most aspects of the teachings quite well, I don't think that Osborne had a good understanding of self-inquiry. He seemed to think that concentrating on the heart center on the right side of the chest while doing self-inquiry was an integral part of the process. When I later read Bhagavan's answers in books such as *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* and *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, I realized that he specifically advised against this particular practice. Overall, though, I got a good grounding from these books. I had a passion to follow the practice and a deep faith in Bhagavan. I think that this elicited grace from Bhagavan and kept me on the right path. If the attitude is right and if the practice is intense enough, it doesn't really matter what you do when you meditate. The purity of intent and purpose carries you to the right place.

RS: If someone wants to learn self-inquiry, what should they read?

DG: I don't know what book I would recommend to new people who want to start self-inquiry. *Be As You Are* is certainly a good start since it was designed for Westerners who have had no previous exposure to Bhagavan and his teachings. There is also a book by Sadhu Om: *The Path of Sri Ramana Part One*. It is a little dogmatic in places but it covers all the basic points well. Self-inquiry is a bit like swimming or riding a bicycle. You don't learn it from books. You learn it by doing it again and again till you get it right.

RS: Could you briefly describe what your life has been like in Tiruvannamalai? What work have you done at Sri Ramanasramam?

DG: I spent my first eighteen months just meditating, practicing self-inquiry, and occasionally walking round Arunachala. In 1978 I began to do voluntary work for [Sri Ramanasramam](#). I looked after their library from 1978 to 1985, edited their magazine for a short period of time, and from 1985 onwards did research for my various books. In the later 1980s and early 90s I also devoted a considerable amount of time to looking after Lakshmana Swamy and Saradamma's garden. They bought land in Tiruvannamalai in 1988 and I ended up helping to develop it. In 1993 I went to Lucknow and spent four years with Papaji, where I wrote [Nothing Ever Happened](#). Since my return to Tiruvannamalai in 1997 I have been writing and researching new books on Ramana.

RS: How have you supported yourself in India all these years?

DG: I didn't. Grace supported me. I have found that if you give all your time to God and his work, then he looks after you. I came here with \$500 in 1976. I didn't earn money for twenty years, but I always had enough to live on. Until I left Lucknow I gave the proceeds from all my books to the various organisations that

supported me while I was writing them.

When I first came to Arunachala I fell in love with the place and wanted to stay as long as I could. I knew I didn't have much money, but I wanted to make it last as long as possible. There was a meter ticking away in my head: I have so much money, I am spending so much per day, and that means I have so many more days here. Those numbers, those equations were there all the time. Then, one day, as I was doing *pradakshina* of Arunachala, it all dropped away. It wasn't a mental decision. I stopped walking, turned, and faced the hill. I knew in that moment that whatever power had brought me here would keep me here until its purpose was finished, and that when it was time to go, it wouldn't matter if I was a millionaire or not, I would have to leave. From then on I stopped caring about money. In the period that I was worrying about money, all I did was spend. When I stopped caring, complete strangers would come up to me and give me money. Whenever I needed money, money just appeared out of nowhere.

RS: Can you give me an example of how this worked?

DG: When I volunteered to look after Lakshmana Swamy's land in the late 80s, I had about \$20 to my name. Somebody in Canada whom I had spoken to for about ten minutes two years before got out of bed and suddenly felt that he should give me some money. He sent me \$1,000, which was enough to get the garden going. I lived like that for years. When you work for Gurus, God pays the bills. That's my experience anyway.

It was Papaji who encouraged me to start working for myself. He himself was a householder who spent decades supporting his family. He generally wouldn't let anyone give up his or her worldly life until retirement age, which in India is around 55. When I started work on [*Nothing Ever Happened*](#), I assumed that all the proceeds would go to him, or to some organization that was promoting his teachings. At some point during the research though, he let me know that he wanted me to accept royalties from the sale of the book.

Nowadays, I am not supported by any institution, so I publish my own books and live off the proceeds, which I have to say are minimal. I can live fairly comfortably in a third world country such as India, but if I tried to live in America on what I earn from my books, I would be several thousand dollars a year below the poverty line.

Next: [I don't think Sri Ramana's teachings were either a belief system or a philosophy, such as advaita, or a practice, such as self-inquiry.](#)

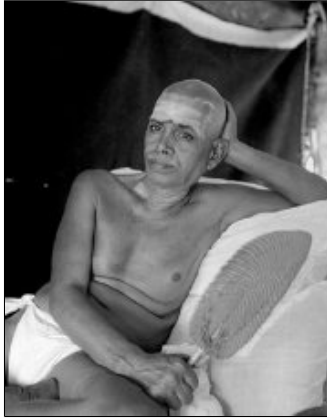
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RS: What effect do you feel in the presence of Arunachala?

DG: Arunachala brought me here in the same way it brought Ramana here. And it has kept me here for most of the last 25 years. I have occasionally left to be with teachers in other places: Nisargadatta Maharaj in Bombay, Lakshmana Swamy in Andhra Pradesh, Papaji in Lucknow, but Arunachala has always brought me back here afterwards. It's my spiritual center of gravity. I can make an effort to be somewhere else if I feel I would spiritually benefit from it, but when I stop making that effort, the natural pull of Arunachala brings me back here again. It's the only place in the world that I feel truly at home.

Arunachala has been attracting people for well over 1,500 years. Ramana liked to quote a saint of about 500 years ago who wrote in one of his verses, "Arunachala, you draw to yourself all those who are rich in *jnana tapas*." *Jnana tapas* can be translated as the extreme efforts made by those who are in search of liberation.

There are dozens of teachers nowadays who tour the world touting their experiences and their teachings. Many of them trace their lineage back to Ramana Maharshi via Papaji. And where did Ramana Maharshi's power and authority come from? From Arunachala, his own Guru and God. He explicitly stated that it was the power of Arunachala that brought about his own Self-realization. He wrote poems extolling its greatness, and in the last 54 years of his life, he never moved more than a mile and a half away from its base. So, it is the power of Arunachala that is the true source of the power that now appears as "*advaita* messengers" all over the world.

For me, this is the world's great power spot. Arunachala has brought about the liberation of several advanced seekers in the past few centuries, and its radiant power remains even today as a beacon for those who want to find out who they really are.

RS: Have there been living people whom you regarded as your Gurus, or who had an especially strong impact on you spiritually?

DG: I think the four key spiritual figures would be Lakshmana Swamy, Saradamma, Nisargadatta Maharaj and Papaji. I have to include Ramana Maharshi on this list, even though I never met him while he was alive. I feel him as strongly as I have felt any other teacher. The Self that took the form of Ramana Maharshi is my Guru. He lit the lamp of enlightenment in the Heart of a few of his devotees, and when I sit in the presence of these beings I am receiving the luster, the light of Ramana Maharshi through them. So I will not say that my Guru has a particular form. I will say that the light of Arunachala became manifest in Ramana, and through him it was passed on to Lakshmana Swamy, Papaji, and Saradamma. When I bask in their light, I am basking in the living, transmitting light of Arunachala Ramana.

Nisargadatta does not belong to this lineage, but he was an enormously beneficial presence in my life in the late 1970s and early 80s. I used to go and see him as often as I could. He repeatedly told me "you are consciousness" and on a few rare, glorious occasions I understood what he was talking about. He was not simply giving me information, he was instead describing my own state, my own experience in that moment. That was his technique. He would talk endlessly about the Self until you suddenly realized directly, "Yes, this is what I am right now."

RS: Have you used any practices in addition to those associated with Sri Ramana?

DG: No. From the moment I first encountered Bhagavan and his teachings in the 1970s I have never found myself attracted to any other teachings or practices.

RS: I often wonder whether Westerners misunderstand Ramana Maharshi. What are the most common misconceptions about his teachings?

DG: I am not sure how much understanding there is of Ramana Maharshi and his teachings in the West. He is an iconic figure to a vast number of people who are following some sort of spiritual path. I think that for many people he epitomizes all that is best in the Hindu Guru tradition, but having said that, I think that very few people know much about him, and even fewer have a good grasp of his teachings. Not many people read books about him nowadays. I know that from trying to sell my own and even fewer would profess themselves to be his devotee. I find there is very little interest in his teachings even among the people who come to visit [Ramanasramam](#). Nowadays, many of the people who come are spiritual tourists, pilgrims who just travel round India, checking out all the various ashrams and teachers. About twenty years ago I met a foreigner here who had come to the ashram for advice on how to do self-inquiry properly. For several days he couldn't find anyone who was practicing it, even in Ramanasramam. The people he asked in the ashram office just

told him to buy the ashram's publications and find out from them how to do it. Eventually, he had what he thought was a bright idea. He stood outside the door of the meditation hall at [Ramanasramam](#), the place where Sri Ramana lived for over twenty years, and asked everyone who came out how to do self-inquiry. It transpired that none of the people inside were doing self-inquiry. They came out one by one and said, "I was doing *japa*," or "I was doing *vipassana*," or "I was doing Tibetan visualizations."

How can there be misunderstandings among people who have never even bothered to find out the teachings in the first place, or put them into practice?

RS: I think that some people who are now teaching in the West are creating misunderstandings about his teachings. Some of them seem to confuse glimpses of nonduality and feelings of relative selflessness with Self-realization. Since a number of these teachers trace their lineage back to Sri Ramana, their students project the ideas of these teachers onto Sri Ramana. What do you think about this?

DG: What are Sri Ramana's teachings? If you ask people who have become acquainted with his life and work, you might get several answers such as "*advaita*" or "self-inquiry." I don't think Sri Ramana's teachings were either a belief system or a philosophy, such as *advaita*, or a practice, such as self-inquiry.

Sri Ramana himself would say that his principal teaching was silence, by which he meant the wordless radiation of power and grace that he emanated all the time. The words he spoke, he said, were for the people who didn't understand these real teachings. Everything he said was therefore a kind of second-level teaching for people who were incapable of dissolving their sense of "I" in his powerful presence. You may understand his words, or at least think that you do, but if you think that these words constitute his teachings, then you have really misunderstood him.

RS: There are some aspects of his spoken teachings that appear to be unique. For example, his reference to the heart center on the right side of the chest. He said that this was the source of the "I" and the place in the body where the sense of "I" had to return in order for realization to take place. People who talk about his teachings in the West rarely seem to mention this point.

DG: Ramana didn't mention it much either. On a few occasions when he was asked about it, he said it was more important to have the experience of the Self, rather than locate it in some part of the body. It is true that no teacher who came before him ever mentioned this, but I would not say that this is a major aspect of his teachings. Nor would I say that is necessary to have this knowledge in order to have an experience of the Self.

RS: How did you choose the subjects for your three biographical books?



Papaji

*For more information
about Papaji, please
visit*

<http://www.poonja.com/>

DG: In two of the three cases the subjects chose me. When I went to Lakshmana Swamy's ashram in the early 1980s, he asked me to write a brief biography of Saradamma, a project that eventually turned into a book-length account of both of them. A few years later, when I wrote a fifty-page account of Papaji's experiences with Ramana, intending to use it in a book about Ramana's disciples, Papaji liked it so much, he invited me back to Lucknow to do a complete biography on him. As for the third biography, I approached Annamalai Swami in the late 1980s, hoping to interview him in order to get enough material for a chapter in the same book that was going to feature Papaji's account. His story turned out to be so engrossing, so detailed, so unlike anything I had come across in the existing Ramana literature, it soon expanded into a book-length project.



Annamalai Swami

RS: All these people seem to be Self-realized. Did you pick them for this reason? How did you know that they are Self-realized?

DG: The simple answer is that no one who is not a *jnani* can really tell who is in that state, and I would not claim to be in that state myself. Ramana told people that the peace one feels in the presence of such beings is a good indication that one is in the presence of an enlightened being, but this is a sign not a proof.

When I first went to see Lakshmana Swamy in the late 1970s, I did not go there with any intention of evaluating him. But as soon as I looked into his eyes, something inside me said, "This man is a *jnani*." Nothing has ever caused me to doubt that first impression. I don't know how I came to that conclusion because I had never had that kind of thought before with anybody else. Something inside me just knew. Up till the time I first met him, I had been meditating intensively for most of the day for a period of about eighteen months. My mind was fairly quiet most of the time and I really felt that I was making good progress on the road to Self-realization. However, within a few seconds of being looked at by Lakshmana Swamy, I was in a state of stillness and peace that was way beyond anything that I had experienced through my own efforts. That one *darshan* effectively demonstrated to me the need for a human Guru, and it also demonstrated to me that there were still people alive in the Ramana lineage who seemed to have the same power and presence that I had read about in so many Ramanasramam books. Since that day a large portion of my life and energy has been devoted to serving such beings and writing about their life and teachings.

RS: What is Self-realization? The terms "glimpse" and "waking-up experience" appear in *Nothing Ever Happened*. Did you invent these terms? What is the relationship between a glimpse or waking-up experience and Self-realization?

DG: I would say that Self-realization is what remains when the mind irrevocably dies in the Heart. The Heart is not a particular place in the body. It is the formless Self, the source and origin of all manifestation. Self-realization is permanent and irreversible. I

also suspect that it is quite rare. Many people have had glimpses or temporary experiences of a state of being in which the mind, the individual "I", temporarily stops functioning, but I don't think that there are many people in the world in whom the "I" has died.

Papaji used to say, "What comes and goes is not real. If you have had an experience that came and went, it was not an experience of the Self because the Self never comes and goes."

I think this is an interesting comment. If it is true, it means that most waking-up experiences are merely new states of mind. It is only when the mind dies completely, never to rise again, that the Self really shines as one's own natural state.

The terms "glimpses" and "waking-up experiences" that you refer to are temporary. They come and they go because the "I" itself has not been permanently eradicated. A powerful Guru may be able to give a glimpse of the Self to just about anyone, but it is not within his power to make it stick. If the person has a mind that is full of desires, those desires will eventually rise again and cover up the glimpse.

RS: Do Westerners tend to have an exaggerated idea of the significance of these preliminary experiences?

DG: When these temporary no-mind states are being experienced, their importance can be greatly exaggerated by people who think that they have attained permanent enlightenment. But in most cases the feeling of self-importance vanishes along with the experience.

Next: [When egolessness is there, there is no one left who can stabilize or lose the experience](#)

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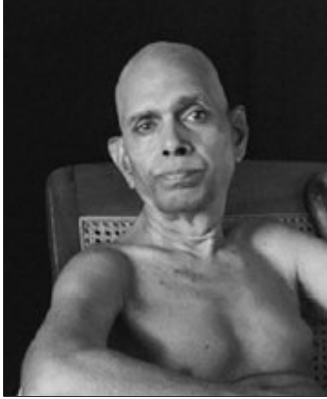
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[Dutch Translation](#) of this interview by Peter Roosendaal

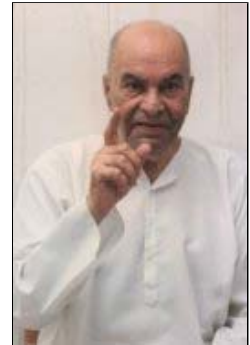


RS: I think you quote Papaji as saying that he met only two Self-realized people in his entire life, Sri Ramana and a Spanish priest. But he also met Nisargadatta Maharaj. Does this mean that he didn't think Maharaj was Self-realized? Can you shed any light on this?

DG: When I first talked to Papaji in 1992, I asked him how many *jnanis* he had met in his life. He scratched his head and came up with three names: Ramana Maharshi, a Sufi pir he met in Madras and Tiruvannamalai, and a wandering *mahatma* who lived in the forests between Tiruvannamalai and Bangalore. When I got to know him better, he would sometimes add names to the list, and Nisargadatta Maharaj was one of them. He went to see him many times in the 1970s and was very impressed with him. J. Krishnamurti also made the list, although Papaji didn't think much of him as a teacher. The Spanish priest never appeared on his list. Papaji said he was the best Christian he had ever met, but he never said he was enlightened.

This list might expand or contract according to his mood or memory, but it never exceeded seven. These were all people he had met on his travels. What I found curious about this was that he never ever included any of his own disciples on this master list, an omission that might lead one to infer that none of his disciples had actually attained the final *sahaja* or natural state of the *jnani*. This is both interesting and paradoxical since many of his disciples were told very categorically by him, "You are enlightened. You are free." When I wrote his biography, I recovered several thousand letters Papaji had written to devotees all over the world. I would say that at least fifty of them could produce a hand-written letter from Papaji congratulating them on their enlightenment.

In the vast majority of cases these experiences were temporary. I often wondered why Papaji was so enthusiastic about these temporary experiences, and many other people felt the same way.



Papaji

To learn more about Papaji, please visit <http://www.poonja.com/>

Lots of people asked him about this, but I don't know anyone who got a straight answer, including me. When I asked him about this phenomenon, he said that he lived in the silence and that when silence spoke, it always said the most appropriate thing, even though it might not be factually accurate. He added, "I have spent all my life in that silence. I have learned to trust what it says."

Implicit in this statement is a recognition that Papaji is sometimes telling people that they are enlightened when he can see clearly that they are not. He trusted the source of these statements, but he could never give a good explanation of why the silence was making him say these things.

RS: Here's a question from a reader which I pass along to you: "Papaji says that the only thing that needs to be done is to stop all effort. When this happens, there is quiet and a sense of egolessness. But in that state, it is possible to ask "Who am I?" and find an observer whose source is yet to be found. In other words, in that state, it seems that self-inquiry is still needed. Does this mean that Papaji is teaching something different from Ramana Maharshi? What is the connection between this effortless state and the state of abiding in the heart?"

DG: When Papaji said in satsang, "Make no effort," he was trying to put the person in front of him into a state of no-mind in which no effort is necessary or possible, since the "I" has temporarily gone. He was not trying to put the person in a halfway stage in which further effort is needed.

Here is a paradox for you. Ramana Maharshi realized the Self without any effort, without being interested in it, and without any practice, and then spent the rest of his life telling people that they must make continuous effort up till the moment of enlightenment. Papaji spent a quarter of a century doing *japa* and meditation prior to his climactic meetings with Ramana, but when he began teaching, he always insisted that no effort was necessary to realize the Self.

Papaji's attitude to self-inquiry was, "Do it once and do it properly." Ramana's was, "Do it intensively and continuously until realization dawns." Although you could never get Papaji to admit that there were differences between his teachings and those of his Guru, they clearly didn't agree on the question of effort.

With regard to the question of the difference between the effortless state and the state of abiding in the Heart, I would refer to Lakshmana Swamy. He agrees with Ramana that hard, continuous effort is needed up till the moment of realization. He also says that by effort the mind can reach the effortless thought-free state, but no further. If that state has been achieved, and if one has the good fortune to be with a realized Guru, then the power of the Self will pull the mind into the Heart and destroy it. In the effortless state, mind is still there, but when one abides in the Heart it is gone.

Papaji conceded that meditation and effort had a limited use. He would sometimes say that intense meditation would earn the *punyas* or spiritual merit necessary to have the opportunity to sit with a realized being. Once that has happened, effort is no longer necessary. In fact, it is counter-productive. When one meets the

Guru, the power of the Self that is present in an enlightened being's satsang takes over and gives the results and experiences that the mind is ready for.

All this probably appears to be confusing and contradictory. The teachers I have written about disagree profoundly on the question of effort and its role in Self-realization, but they all agree that being in the presence of a realized being is the greatest aid to enlightenment. I can say from my own experience that when one is in the presence of such beings, mind drops away of its own accord.

RS: In his book *Relaxing Into Clear Seeing*, Arjuna Nick Ardagh says, "In the past few years, there has been a dramatic increase in the ease with which Self-realization can occur. Indeed, a kind of 'epidemic' has begun in the West whereby the awakened view is becoming increasingly available." It seems to me that Arjuna is referring here to glimpses, not Self-realization, and I wonder if they are any more common today than they have been in India for millennia. Perhaps the real difference is that Indians didn't regard these glimpses as particularly unusual or worth noting.

DG: I don't think that there is an epidemic of Self-realization in the West or anywhere else. I think full realization is a rare phenomenon. There are certainly more people who think that they have realized the Self, but I think that they are deluding themselves.

RS: According to some Western advaita teachers who claim to follow Sri Ramana's teachings, Self-realization is a two-part process. First, there is an awakening, a temporary experience of non-duality and egolessness. The second step is to stabilize the experience of this awakening, or in other words, make it permanent. But when I read about Mathru Sri Sarada in your book *No Mind - I Am The Self*, I seem to get a completely different picture. In her case, a permanent awakening experience may have been necessary, but by itself was not sufficient. For her, Self-realization happened only when her mind descended into her heart center and dissolved permanently. I get the impression that she could have remained in the "awakened state" indefinitely without this descent into the Heart. Would you comment on this?

DG: When egolessness is there, there is no one left who can stabilize or lose the experience. These experiences come and go. They go because the *vasanas* of the mind reassert themselves. When they arise and take over, you resume the practice again. This is the classic prescription of the *Gita*, and it is also what Ramana taught. Stay awake, stay mindful, and whenever you catch the mind straying, take it back to its source.

With regard to Mathru Sri Sarada, I think you are referring to the experience she had just before she realized the Self. She felt that her mind had died because she was temporarily abiding in the Heart, but her Guru, Lakshmana Swamy, could see that her "I" was not dead, which meant that this was a temporary experience. She was talking about her experiences and genuinely felt that her

"I" was dead, but it was not a real, permanent awakening.

A few minutes later, with the help of her Guru, the "I" went back to its source and died forever. There was no fully awakened state prior to this experience. The final death of the "I" in the Heart was necessary to complete the realization process

RS: Can you name any people who are teaching today who are Self-realized?

DG: I could hide behind my earlier statement and say that I am not qualified to say who is enlightened and who is not. That is true, but I have absolute faith that Lakshmana Swamy and Saradamma are in that state. I don't want to make comments about anybody else.

RS: What plans do you have for future books and other works?

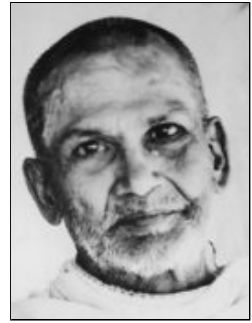
DG: I am working on a third volume of *The Power of the Presence*, and I hope to see it published in a few months. After that, I have a project to translate and publish some of Muruganar's poetry from Tamil into English. He recorded many of Bhagavan's teaching statements in short Tamil verses, and most of them have never been translated. This will be a major undertaking that may take a year or two. I also hope to get back to working on Papaji in the near future. I particularly want to edit the Lucknow satsang dialogues from the early 1990s. That's a big job, though, and would probably take years. I recently volunteered to make a book of all Sadhu Natanananda's writings on Bhagavan for [Ramanasramam](#). I will fit that in between all my other projects.

When I sit down in front of my screen in the morning I often have no idea what I will be working on ten minutes later. I might look at something I have edited recently, move on to something else, and then find another chapter of another book that suddenly grabs my attention and interest. Or I might switch the machine off and go outside and do some gardening instead.

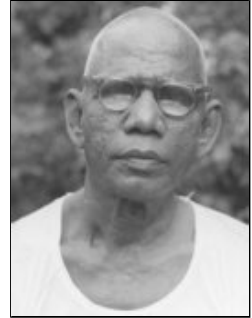
I have come to the conclusion that Bhagavan brought me to Tiruvannamalai to write about him and his disciples. I have learned this the hard way. I went back to England twenty years ago, hoping to earn enough money to come back to India and not do any work here. Nobody was willing to hire me to do anything. I even flunked an interview for picking up litter in the London zoo. But as soon as I had the idea of writing a book about Bhagavan, everything fell into place. Though I had never written anything in my life, I was given a contract by a major publisher and sent back to India to write about him. That's how *Be As You Are* came into existence.

A few years before that I gave up editing the [Ramanasramam](#) magazine and went to Andhra Pradesh to be with Lakshmana Swamy. My intention was just to meditate there. I had had enough of writing, but within a few weeks of my arrival he asked me to write *No Mind - I am the Self*. Whenever I do work on Bhagavan or his disciples, everything goes well. Whenever I try to do something else, so many problems come up, nothing ever gets accomplished or completed.

Having learned this from experience, I have now surrendered to



Muruganar



Sadhu Natanananda

this destiny. I enjoy the work, and many, many people seem to appreciate the books. I asked Papaji years ago whether writing all these books on Bhagavan was a distraction for the mind.

He replied, "Any association with Bhagavan is a blessing." I took that as an instruction to carry on with the work.

RS: Thanks very much for this interview, David. I learned a lot from it, and you have been extraordinarily generous.

DG: You're welcome.

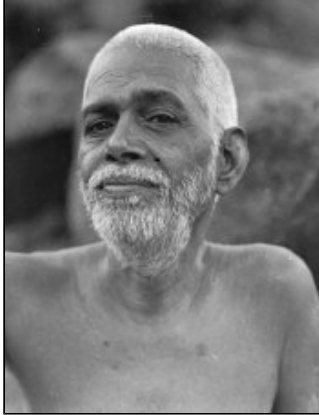
Next: [When egolessness is there, there is no one left who can stabilize or lose the experience](#)

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Mostly About Books

Michelle Mikklesen interviews David Godman

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Sri Ramana Maharshi

A few months ago I spent a pleasant hour or so telling a curious visitor, Michelle Mikklesen, a few stories about how some of my books came to be written. She liked some of the anecdotes so much, she came back with a tape recorder and asked me to tell the stories again. Second time round, she played whatever the female equivalent of a straight man is, just prompting me with occasional questions, rather than doing a proper interview. Some days later she was nice enough to supply me with a transcript. This is my edited version. Thank you Michelle!

Michelle: Can you start by telling me how you became a writer?

David: A series of events led up to it. When I was staying near [Ramanasramam](#) in 1977, I became aware that the ashram had many good spiritual books that were hard to get access to. They were locked in a room near the ashram's cowshed, and the key was held by a rather grumpy man in the ashram office who wouldn't let anyone in the room. I volunteered to sort them out and turn the collection into a library that people could use. There were thousands of books there on all kinds of spiritual topics. When I was finally given the job, I realised that most of these books had been sent to the ashram free of charge because the publishers wanted the books to be reviewed in the ashram's magazine, *The Mountain Path*. I then discovered that the reviewing process was in a disorganised and moribund state. Books were being sent out to reviewers who never reviewed them, or if they did, would take so long, when the reviews finally came back, the book would be almost out of print. Realising that the flow of books would stop if I didn't get the reviewing process properly organised, I began to do reviews myself, just to ensure that the publishers would be satisfied that their books were receiving proper attention. When the editor realised that I could write well, or at least better than most of his regular contributors, I was given other writing and editing jobs. Within a couple of years I ended up editing the whole magazine,

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[When did it occur to you to write a book, rather than just reviews or articles?](#)

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Dutch Translation of this interview by Peter Roosendaal



[Mikklesen Nederlands](#)

primarily, I suspect, because no one else wanted the job. In retrospect I would say that I became a writer simply so that I could have a good supply of books to read.

Michelle: When did it occur to you to write a book, rather than just reviews or articles?

David: I think the idea came from the teachers I have been with. It didn't seem to originate with me. When I was visiting Nisargadatta Maharaj in the late 1970s, I mentioned that I was writing reviews for *The Mountain Path*. He gave me a very strong look, almost a glare, and said, 'Why don't you write a book about the teachings? It's the teachings that are important.' I remember being very surprised by this suggestion. The idea had never occurred to me before. I didn't follow it up for a long time, but when I finally got round to it, I remembered his words and the force with which he had spoken them. It seemed to be an order rather than just a suggestion.

Maharaj encouraged me to write about the teachings, but at the same time he discouraged me from publicly speaking about them. Around 1980 I gave a talk in Delhi on Bhagavan's teachings. On the way back to Tiruvannamalai I stopped in Bombay and went to see Maharaj for a few days. Someone must have told him about the talk I had given in Delhi. When he called me up to the front of the room, I went up and sat opposite him, facing him. That was where people sat when he put them on the spot.

'No, no,' he said, 'sit next to me, facing the people.' My spirits sank. I didn't know what he had planned, but I knew I wouldn't enjoy it.

He started off making fun of me, saying that whereas only about forty people came to hear him speak, I had just been talking to hundreds of people in Delhi. I was obviously much better than he was at this job, he said, so he invited me to give a speech to all the people there. I tried to back out, but when I realised he was serious, I gave a five-minute summary of what I had said in Delhi. I felt like an undergraduate physics student, trying to give a lecture in front of Einstein. One of his translators gave a simultaneous translation.

When it was over, he said, quietly, 'I can't quarrel with anything you have said. What you said was all correct.'

Then he glared at me and added, 'But don't waste your time giving spiritual talks until you are enlightened yourself, until you know from direct experience what you are talking about. Otherwise you will end up like that Wolter Keers.'

Wolter Keers was a Dutch *advaita* teacher who toured around Europe, giving lectures on *advaita* and yoga in at least three different languages. He was a very fluent and informative teacher and he used to come to see Maharaj regularly. Every time he came, Maharaj would shout at him, telling him he wasn't enlightened, and that he shouldn't set himself up as a teacher until he was. I got the message. I have never given a public talk since then.

I received more or less the same advice from Papaji. He very much encouraged me to write about him. In fact, he invited me from Tiruvannamalai to Lucknow to compile the work that was eventually published as [*Nothing Ever Happened*](#). When I interviewed him for a video documentary in 1993, he said, 'When



*Nisargadatta
Maharaj*

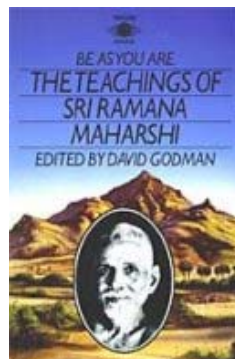


[*Nothing Ever
Happened*](#)

you go back to the West, if people ask you about what happened to you in Lucknow, keep quiet. If they ask again, just laugh.' I was asked by him to write about him, but he didn't want me to appear in front of an audience and speak about him. Other people were encouraged to speak, but were not asked to write. Different people received different orders, different advice.

Michelle: Did any other teachers encourage you to write?

David: When I first went to Lakshmana Ashram in 1982, I was actually running away from writing. I had been working at [Ramanasramam](#), editing their magazine and looking after their library, for several years. I just wanted to meditate and sit at the feet of a realised teacher. Within a couple of weeks of my arrival, Lakshmana Swamy asked me to write a small book about Saradamma. He explained to me that he thought she might give up her body because of her tendency to go into long, deep *samadhis* from which it was very difficult to bring her back to normal consciousness. He thought that if she had devotees of her own, she would have to externalise her attention more in order to deal with them. The book project was a way of letting the world know that she existed. At that time both of them were virtually unknown. I stayed in their ashram for about seven months that year. During the day there were usually two of us there, apart from Saradamma and Lakshmana Swamy. A few other people would sometimes come in the evenings. For one period of about two weeks, when Saradamma was in town with her family, I was the only person there, apart from Lakshmana Swamy.



[Be As You Are](#)

Michelle: This was the second book you wrote, the first being [Be As You Are](#).

David: No, it was the first. I wrote it in 1982, but it wasn't published until around 1986.

Michelle: What happened? Why was there such a delay?

David: It's a long story. When Lakshmana Swami asked me to write this book, I, of course, agreed. He said that I should talk to Saradamma and get her story from her. However, when I approached her, I found that she wasn't interested in talking. She didn't want the book at all. She didn't want a lot of people coming to see her, something she knew might happen if this book ever came out. She was quite content with the life she had.

I reported back to Lakshmana Swamy, telling him that Saradamma had no interest in cooperating with this project. He decided that he would have to sit next to her and compel her to tell her story. He knew that she would find it very hard to refuse his request to talk if he was there in person. This was a big bonus for me because it meant that I would get to see them both every day for about an hour while Saradamma narrated various incidents from her life.

Even with Lakshmana Swamy sitting next to her, encouraging her to speak, it was sometimes hard to get information from her. Sometimes she would talk willingly, but at other times she would close down completely and refuse to say anything. After a week or

so of interviewing her, she announced that she wasn't going to cooperate any more unless half the book was about Lakshmana Swamy. He didn't particularly want a book about himself to be published, but he had to agree in the end because that was the only way he could get Saradamma to carry on telling her stories. The interviews resumed. Neither wanted a book about himself or herself, but both wanted a book about the other.

Lakshmana Swamy had told Saradamma about many incidents from his own life. She wrote down everything she could remember and then interviewed him privately to get extra information. All this she wrote down in a big notebook that she eventually passed on to me. Once I had the basic story straight, I asked him many supplementary questions that he was always happy to answer.

Saradamma seemed to have almost perfect recall of just about every minute of every day of the years she was doing her *sadhana*. Lakshmana Swamy occasionally had to prompt her to stick to essentials. Even so, the material I was collecting was rapidly increasing every day. I realised that the 'small booklet on Saradamma' that Lakshmana Swamy had originally envisaged was going to be quite a substantial book.

One morning, when I went to the interview session on Lakshmana Swamy's veranda, he announced, 'No more research or interviews. You can go off and write the book now. I want you to finish it in two weeks.' I was stunned. It seemed to me that there were still many more good stories to be collected, and as for writing a book from start to finish in less than two weeks, I couldn't begin to imagine how that might be accomplished.

Two factors had combined to produce this ultimatum. Lakshmana Swamy only had a very small amount of money available for the publication of this book. He had received an estimate from a local printer that made him realise that he couldn't afford to print a bigger book. The two-week deadline came from a plan he had to put a copy of the book on Ramana Maharshi's *samadhi* on his next visit to Tiruvannamalai. He had budgeted two weeks for me to write the book and about a month to print it.

I sat down to write the book. I wrote out the first few drafts by hand and then later typed the final version on an old typewriter that had a couple of letters missing. I had to fill in the gaps by hand later. I took the two-week deadline very seriously. I seem to remember working round the clock for the last few days. I definitely stayed up all night the day before I was due to deliver the manuscript, and I think I only finished it an hour or so before Swamy's regular 9 a.m. *darshan*. In those days he was much more available. Visitors could sit with him and ask questions just about every day. I prostrated before him at 9 a.m. and presented my manuscript. Saradamma wasn't there that day, but I can't remember why. He laughed and said that he wasn't able to read it because he had broken his glasses the day before and wouldn't be able to get a new pair for several days. This was the first sign that the deadline wasn't going to be met. The last-minute rush hadn't really been necessary. Since he couldn't read any of it himself, at his request I read out the chapter in which Saradamma had realised the Self in his presence. He seemed to enjoy it.

About a week later he announced in the morning *darshan* that he had read the manuscript and liked it. He looked at me and apparently said that I had done a good job. I say 'apparently'

because I didn't hear him say this. The other people present all heard him say these words but nothing like this registered in my mind. Lakshmana Swamy is extremely sparing with his praise of devotees, other than Saradamma of course, and I think that this was the only complimentary thing he has ever said about me directly to my face. And I missed it. Maybe he thought it would be bad for my ego to hear it and somehow managed to make sure that everyone there heard it except me.

The manuscript went to a local devotee who had a printing press in Gudur, the local town. Unfortunately, he wasn't equipped to print books. I think his staple product was wedding invitations and other items of a similar size. He didn't have enough letters to make a book, and his main compositor seemed to be drunk a lot of the time. For those people who have been brought up on word-processors I need to say that once upon a time books were composed letter by letter. Small metal letters would be hammered into grooves on wooden blocks, the metal surfaces would be inked and a page would be printed as a proof sheet. When mistakes were spotted, the metal letters had to be pulled out and rearranged. It may sound medieval, but this, with many elaborations, was how most of the world's books were printed up until the 1980s. It can be done fairly quickly by experts, but if you haven't done a job like this before, it can take months and months. That's what happened. By the time the visit to Ramanasramam came round, only a few pages had been assembled, and they were full of mistakes. It eventually became clear that this particular press couldn't do the job, but by then the money for the printing had been spent on other projects. The manuscript was shelved for a few years and was only printed in 1986 when an American devotee came forward and offered to pay for it to be done in a major printing press. Before it was printed in 1986 I took the opportunity to include a few extra stories that had come to light in the intervening years, and I also went through it again to improve the style. The first draft had been done in an extreme hurry, and in several places it showed.

Michelle: Did both Lakshmana Swamy and Saradamma go through the book prior to its publication?

David: Oh yes, they both took their editing work very seriously. Lakshmana Swamy could read and speak English quite well because he had learned the language at school and college. I think he went through the manuscript four or five times, and each time he returned it to me there would be portions deleted or comments added in the margin. When he was finally satisfied with it, a devotee who knew good Telugu and English read it out in Telugu to Saradamma, and she too made a number of changes. It was very much their book, their story. I was just the scribe who put it into shape for them.

Michelle: Let's move on to *Be As You Are*. That's the book that most people associate with you. How did that come to be written?

David: In 1983 I went back to England, hoping to get a job. I had been in India seven years, and for most of the previous five years I had been supported by [Ramanasramam](#) because I had been doing

various jobs for them - running their library, editing their magazine, and so on. I wanted to come back to India with enough money to be financially independent. I wanted to live outside the ashram, supporting myself, and I wanted to spend more time meditating, without being dependent on an institution for food and accommodation. Well, it didn't work out. No one wanted to hire me to do anything. I sent off lots of applications for jobs that I was eminently qualified to do and either received no reply at all, or I received rejection letters that were downright offensive. I had started and run a library in India for five years, but when I applied for a job to run a private library that was smaller than the one in Tiruvannamalai, I received a reply that said: 'Dear Mr Godman, Thank you very much for your very entertaining application. However, we would prefer to engage someone who is qualified to do the job.' This went on for months. I even blew an interview to pick up litter because I laughed at the wrong moment. Bhagavan says in *Maharshi's Gospel* that if you are destined to work, you cannot avoid it, and if you are destined not to work, no matter how hard you look for a job, no one will hire you. That was my situation in the summer of 1983. What I didn't realise at the time was that Bhagavan had other plans for me. The landlord of the house where I was staying was a philosophy lecturer in Leicester University, and so was his wife. He had just delivered a manuscript his wife had written to the editor of a London publisher.

When she discovered that he too was a philosophy lecturer, she had said, 'Why don't you write a book for us as well. We are always looking for new books on philosophy.'

I perked up when I heard this. This was something I could do. I called up the editor and asked if she wanted a book on Ramana Maharshi. Her reply astounded me:

'Come to my office at once. Don't go anywhere else. We want you. Come right now.' After months and months of rejections, this was an astounding turn of events. I thought up a quick plan for a book and discussed it with her a few hours later. She checked on the sales figures of the few other books on Ramana that had been published in the West and said, 'We'll do it'. It was as simple as that. I was given a contract and sent off to India to put together [*Be As You Are*](#). I was astonished because I had been brought up believing one of the standard myths of authorship. The would-be writer spends months or years writing a book. He or she then spends just as long sending the manuscript off to various publishers, who all reject it. Then, if he or she is lucky, the 101st publisher finally says 'Yes'.

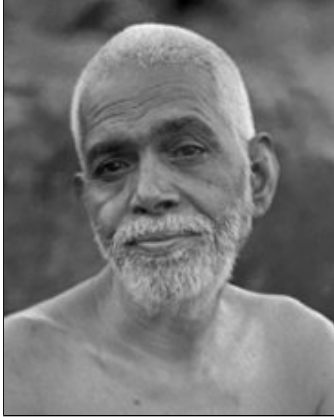
It was my destiny to come back to India and write books on Bhagavan, his teachings, and his disciples. When I tried to do something else, I couldn't make it happen.

When I went to Lakshmana Ashram in 1982, it was to get away from the writing and editing work I was doing for [*Ramanasramam*](#). Within a couple of weeks I was writing a book there. When I went to England the following year, hoping to generate enough cash so that I wouldn't have to do writing work in India, I ended up coming back with a contract for a book on Bhagavan. That has been my work, my destiny, more or less ever since. Nowadays, I don't try to fight it. I enjoy it.

Next: [Many great saints have lived and taught here during that period.](#)

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Sri Ramana Maharshi

Michelle: [*Be As You Are*](#) was a big success. Most people who have only read one book about Bhagavan's teachings have probably read that one. Why do you think so many people bought it and appreciated it? There are many other books around on Bhagavan's teachings.

David: The book did very well outside India because it had a structure that made the teachings accessible and understandable. Bhagavan's teachings can be very confusing if you don't have a background of Vedanta, or if you don't understand that he gives different answers to the same question to different people. I think the book succeeded because readers were given the right set of keys to understand all the different things he said, all the different levels of the teachings.

When I went to see the editor in London for that first meeting, she asked if I had a sample to show her. I didn't because I had only dreamed up the scheme that morning.

I told her, 'I'll lend you my copy of *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*. It's the biggest collection of his dialogues. I will definitely be taking quite a few extracts from this book.'

When I collected the book a couple of days later she had a bemused look on her face.

'I hope your book is better than this,' she said. 'I couldn't understand a word of it.'

This was a woman who was the commissioning editor of the spiritual book division of a major London publisher. If people like her can't understand Bhagavan's teachings by reading books such as *Talks*, it's a good guess that most other people can't make much sense of them either.

The other thing that made it such a success was Penguin's ability to distribute it so well. Throughout the 80s and 90s I was astounded at all the different places I saw it on sale. If a bookstore only had ten spiritual books on its shelves, that would usually be one of them. For many people in the West [*Be As You Are*](#) was their introduction to Bhagavan simply because this was the only book on

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In this page:

[You said that you typed out No Mind - I am the Self on a broken typewriter.](#)

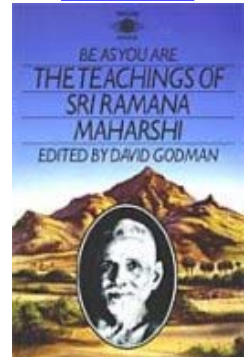
[After *Be As You Are* and *No Mind - I am the Self* came out, you didn't publish again for many years. What were you doing?](#)

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Dutch Translation of this interview by Peter Roosendaal



[Mikklesen](#)
[Nederlands](#)



[*Be As You Are*](#)

Bhagavan's teachings that ever made it to the shelves of their local bookstore.

I remember going with my father and his second wife into a boutique in Pondicherry around 1990. They were hunting for cheap clothes and souvenirs. Near the checkout counter there was a magazine rack and a shelf that had four books for sale. One was a Delia Smith best-selling cookery book. The next two were airport-style thriller novels by famous authors of that genre, and the fourth was *Be As You Are*. My father was very impressed to find me in such company. Judging by the comments he made to other people, he wasn't particularly impressed by the life I had chosen for myself.

Michelle: How long did it take you to compile this book?

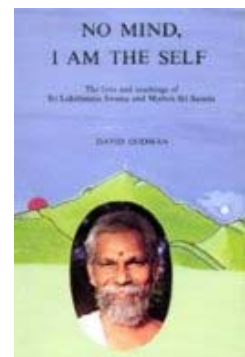
David: I suppose I did it in two or three months, mostly in my spare time. When I went back to India, I took over the running of the Ramanasramam library again, and that was a seven-day-a-week job. I did the editing in the evenings. However, saying this is a bit misleading because I had spent the previous seven years reading and studying the Ramana literature, and I had spent years doing self-enquiry quite intensively. In addition to all this, I had had many long discussions and debates with other devotees on all aspects of the teachings. All this matured into the understanding that I presented in the book. If a musician tells you that he just spent a week learning a new piece of music, it is understood that he spent several years prior to that week mastering his instrument. I put the book together in a few weeks, but I can also say that it was the culmination of several years of study and practice.

Michelle: You said that you typed out *No Mind - I am the Self* on a broken typewriter. Had your technology improved by the time you did *Be As You Are*?

David: Not really. I didn't even own a typewriter. I had to borrow one to type out the final draft. Before I started the work I bought copies of all the Ramana books I thought I would need from the ashram bookstore. Then I cut out all the teaching dialogues and put them in files. I arranged the clippings into subjects and then stapled conversations to pieces of blank paper in an order that seemed to make sense to me. It was classic cut-and-paste word-processing, but I did it with scissors and a stapler instead of a computer. I don't think I even saw a computer until about five years later. When I was satisfied with the order of the extracts, I wrote brief introductions to each chapter and then typed the whole thing out. I had been given an 80,000-word limit by the publisher. I wanted to go right up to that limit and have as much of Bhagavan as possible in the book. That meant keeping my explanations brief and terse. It's occasionally good to have limits like this. It makes you think about the essence of the teachings. Also, summarising complex ideas in half a page is a good test of one's understanding.

Michelle: After *Be As You Are* and *No Mind - I am the Self* came out, you didn't publish again for many years. What were you doing?

David: I did do a lot of writing and research during this period but



No Mind - I am the Self

none of it ever made it as far as publication, at least not in book form. I decided that I wanted to edit a book about all the various saints who had been associated with Arunachala over the last 1,500 years. Many great saints have lived and taught here during that period. Their writings exist in Tamil and Sanskrit, but virtually none of their output has ever been published in English. I decided to find as much of this material as possible and then find people who could translate it for me. So many bad or weirdly inexplicable things happened to the various people I co-opted into this scheme, I began to believe that this particular project didn't have Arunachala's blessings.

All this happened a long time ago. Let me see if I can remember it all. A friend of mine, Robert Butler, had learned classical, literary Tamil. He volunteered to translate some verses for me, but since he was new to the Tamil translation business, he wanted to have his material checked by someone who knew a lot more Tamil than he did. I approached Sadhu Om, who was generally regarded as being the best Tamil poet and scholar in the vicinity of Ramanasramam, and asked him if he would be willing to check a few of the verses for me, just to see if Robert's understanding was good enough for him to continue with his work. Sadhu Om said he was very busy on other work, but he promised he would get round to it at some point. Weeks went by and nothing happened. Then Michael James, who was his chief assistant, approached me and said that Sadhu Om had promised to do them the following day. Michael had put the verses on his desk so that he could start work on them the next morning. That night Sadhu Om had a stroke from which he never recovered. He died a few days later.

Robert, meanwhile, had gone to England to see his family. While he was there, visas were introduced for British and other Commonwealth people. He wanted to come back with an entry visa that would enable him to stay full-time at the ashram where he hoped to continue working with me. I got the president of [Ramanasramam](#) to sponsor him with a signed letter that stated that he was coming to India to do voluntary work at the ashram. These visas usually take about three months to process, but his application dragged on for over a year, with no decision forthcoming from the government. Eventually, someone in Delhi checked with Ramanasramam to see if the ashram really was sponsoring him. Someone who didn't know anything about this arrangement wrote back saying that the ashram had never heard of him, and that he was not coming here to work. That letter effectively left Robert marooned in England because the Indian government was convinced that he had faked his visa application.

I then approached a famous Tamil translator called Vanmikinathan and was delighted when he agreed to help me. I gave him fifty-three verses from the *Tevarams* that had been composed by famous saints who had been associated with Arunachala in the sixth to ninth centuries. It was tricky stuff to translate, needing expertise in that era of Tamil literature. Vanmikinathan had already translated and published poems from this era, so I was very happy to have him on board. After a few days I received a letter from him that stated that he had completed the work, that he would make a fair copy of it and mail it to me the following day. I was impressed with his speed. A few days later I received another letter from him whose text went approximately as

follows:

'Dear Mr Godman, I translated your verses and left them on my desk, thinking that I would copy them out later. Then a gust of wind came in through the window, picked up your papers and blew them out into the garden. When I went outside to collect them, there was no sign of them anywhere.'

He ended up getting into a protracted dispute with the Ramakrishna Math in Madras over another book he had translated for them, and I lost his services. For a while I was being helped by Ratna Navaratnam, a Sri Lankan scholar who was an expert on old Tamil and a devotee of Bhagavan. I can't remember why she dropped out. It couldn't have been anything too bad, or I would remember. Another foreign scholar was caught up in this drama. Marye Tonnaire was an American woman who wanted to do a Ph.D on *Arunachala Mahatmyam*, the Sanskrit work that records all the puranic stories and legends about Arunachala. She had a plan to move to Tiruvannamalai with her son and do all the work here. She arranged for her son to do a year of French schooling here by post. I arranged all the paperwork at this end. I got her registered at Madras University and arranged for the professor of Sanskrit there to be her nominal thesis supervisor since she couldn't do graduate work here without one. I went to all this trouble because she had promised to do a translation of *Arunachala Puranam* for me while she was here. This is a Tamil work that records most of the stories that appear in the *Arunachala Mahatmyam*. Everything was ready for her arrival but the Indian embassy in Paris gave her the wrong form to fill in (a tourist visa application) and when it was processed, it was turned down because one cannot do academic research in India on a tourist visa. She had to abandon all her research plans and stay in France with her husband and son. Once you have been turned down for a visa, you can't apply again, even if it is the government's fault for giving you the wrong form. Another resource gone.

While all this was going on, I was continuing to collect material. I had found a version of the *Arunachala Mahatmyam* entitled *Kodi Rudra Samhita* in a government manuscript library in Madras. Since it only existed on palm leaves, I had to engage a pandit to copy it out for me in the library. The only person I knew who knew enough Sanskrit to tackle this kind of job was a devotee called Jagadish Swami who lived in Ramanasramam. I gave him a xeroxed copy and he said he would have a look at it and tell me afterwards if he thought he would be able to translate it for me. Before he had a chance to go through it, he died while he was meditating in his room. He sat cross-legged on a metal chair, which must have been very uncomfortable, in the evening for his usual meditation, and was found there the next morning, still upright, and still cross-legged, but definitely dead. I suppose that it was a good way to die, but I really hoped that my manuscript didn't have anything to do with it.

A couple of days later I did a *pradakshina* of Arunachala. I faced the mountain when I reached the Ganesh temple and tank that is about a third of the way round the hill.

I addressed Siva and said, 'Too many things are going wrong with this project. If you don't want me to carry on with it, give me a sign.'

I should mention that I had already asked Saradamma at

Lakshmana Ashram if I should carry on with the work, and she had refused to commit herself either way. She told me that she didn't want the responsibility for it. I had already told her about some of the bad things that had been happening. I should have taken this lack of enthusiasm as a sign to stop.

Anyway, within a day or so I received a bill from the man in Madras who had copied out the *Kodi Rudra Samhita* for me. I think I assumed at the time that this bill had been paid long before. It was a minor event, but I took this as the sign that I should stop.

Relative to the other people who were involved in this project, I escaped rather lightly. I fractured my femur around this time and spent twelve weeks in traction, but some of the others fared far worse than I did.

Some of the work I did on Arunachala saints did eventually appear in *The Mountain Path*, the ashram's magazine, but not under my name. I was already contributing articles on Bhagavan under my own name, so when I had other material to contribute I would usually use someone else's name. One man, for example, had managed to get a study visa to come to India, but he wasn't doing any studying. He was just meditating instead. I put a couple of articles in his name so that he would have something to show the police if he ever got the midnight knock. Another friend of mine, Nadhia Sutara, was staying at Guhai Namasivaya Temple on the hill. Since her tenure there was not very secure, I put her name on two articles about Guhai Namasivaya and Guru Namasivaya, hoping that the man who ran the place would be impressed enough to let her continue to stay there.

Michelle: Amazing! You are lucky to still be alive. What did you turn to after this project fell through?

David: I started to collect the reminiscences of old devotees of Ramana Maharshi, particularly the ones that hadn't appeared in English before. I think the aim was to produce a large, single-volume anthology in which each devotee would be given a chapter to tell his or her story. I collected a lot of good material, but the book itself didn't see the light of day until fairly recently. It got demoted in my priorities because other projects came up that seemed more exciting, more appealing.

Around 1987 I approached Annamalai Swami and asked him if I could interview him for this book. I knew he had worked with Bhagavan in the ashram in the 1930s and I assumed that his reminiscences would probably make a good chapter. Annamalai Swami's translator, who was a good friend of mine, lobbied on my behalf but couldn't get Annamalai Swami to agree to talk to me. Several weeks went by during which Annamalai Swami steadfastly refused to tell me his story. Then Sundaram, his translator, had a flash of inspiration.

He told Annamalai Swami, 'David has already written a good book on Bhagavan's teachings. Many of the foreigners who come here say that it is the best book on Bhagavan's teachings.'

This intrigued Annamalai Swami because he himself spent an hour or so every afternoon answering questions on Bhagavan and his teachings. He was beginning to attract foreign visitors to his ashram, and he agreed to talk to them on condition that the topic of conversation was Bhagavan. He didn't want to talk about anything



The gopuram over the entrance to the Guhai Namasivaya Temple

[\(Click on image to enlarge\)](#)



Annamalai Swami



Annamalai Swami, Sundaram his manager/translator and myself, 1994

[\(Click on image to enlarge\)](#)

else. Bhagavan had told him not to socialise and to stay at home and meditate as much as possible. People who just wanted to meditate with him were told to go and meditate in [Ramanasramam](#), but people who had questions about spiritual practice or Bhagavan's teachings, were generally welcome, but only for as long as it took for Annamalai Swami to answer their questions. He was a hard man to get to see, and it was even harder to get to spend a lot of time with him.

Annamalai Swami instructed Sundaram to get hold of a copy of [Be As You Are](#) and read it out to him. Annamalai Swami didn't know much English, so Sundaram had to translate as he went along. Annamalai Swami listened to almost the entire book before finally deciding that he would be willing to talk to me.

When I finally managed to see him, he told me, 'You have a good understanding of Bhagavan's teachings. I know that if I speak to you, you will not misrepresent what I say.'

There was already a very bad book about his life in Tamil by Suddhananada Bharati, and Annamalai Swami didn't want another equally bad version to appear.

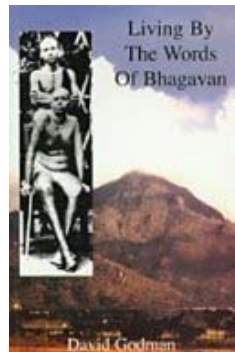
Up until that time Annamalai Swami had not told his story to anyone, or rather I should say that he had not told his story in a systematic way. He had told Sundaram and a few other people odd stories, but he had never linked them all together. For the next few weeks I went there every afternoon and interviewed him for about ninety minutes. I soon realised that this was not going to be just another chapter in my book. The material he was giving me was so astonishing, so extensive, I knew I had a full-length book project on my hands. When the interviews were completed, it took me almost eighteen months of steady, patient work and detailed research to put together the book [Living by the Words of Bhagavan](#).

Annamalai Swami was something of an inspiration for me. He seemed to epitomise and embody all the qualities that a good devotee needs when he is dealing with his Guru and his ashram. I admired his integrity and his unshakable determination to carry out Bhagavan's instructions, irrespective of the consequences. That's why I called the book [Living by the Words of Bhagavan](#). Annamalai Swami's whole life was dedicated to carrying out his Guru's words.

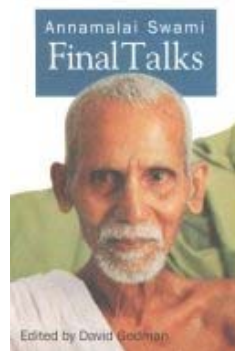
When Sundaram read out the final version, Annamalai Swami was very happy with it. However, when he arranged a second reading for the Tamil devotees who couldn't understand the original English, some of them pointed out to him that a few of the stories might get him into trouble with the Ramanasramam authorities. He agreed that this was probably true. He sent for me and told me to hide the manuscript and not let anyone see it.

'When I am dead,' he said, 'you can do anything you like with it, but until then don't let anyone read it. Bhagavan told me to lead a quiet life and not to see many people. I will not be able to follow his instructions if lots of people come to see me as a result of reading this book, and I don't want my life to be disturbed by people coming here to complain about some of these stories.'

This was 1987 I think. I put it away and didn't take it out again until 1994. That year, he changed his mind and allowed it to be printed. A year later he passed away. I think he was right to put off the publication. When it came out, it did attract a lot of new people, and several of them did come to complain about some of the stories he had narrated.



[Living by the Words of Bhagavan](#)



[Annamalai Swami: Final Talks](#)

In the last few months of his life there was a tape recorder running while he gave his answers to visitors. At Sundaram's request I edited these new dialogues into a new book, [Final Talks](#), which, I think, makes quite a nice supplement to the original biography.

Michelle: We seem to have filled in some of the blanks on your 1980s map. What were you doing for the rest of the time?

David: I was collecting more information about old devotees of Bhagavan and from about 1988 onwards I was helping Lakshmana Swamy and Saradamma with a piece of land they had bought here.

Lakshmana Swamy had mentioned a few times that he wanted to move back to Tiruvannamalai. Sundaram, Annamalai Swami's translator, and I were asked to look for possible properties that might be suitable for him. We found a few, but every time Lakshmana Swamy was taken to see them, they didn't appeal to him. At one point we actually agreed to buy a piece of land near the junction of the *pradakshina* road and the Bangalore road, but the owners backed out after a price had been agreed.

Then a piece of land came on the market that was located behind the Government Arts College. Much to our surprise Lakshmana Swamy gave the order to buy before he had even seen it. It seems that he had been sitting on this land in the early 1950s when he had suddenly had a vision of himself living there forty years later. The next time he came to Tiruvannamalai he looked at the land and confirmed that this was the place where he had had the vision. He had let us run around, looking at other properties and negotiating for them, but somehow he seemed to know that he would end up living in the place where he is now.

I volunteered to develop the garden. It was just an empty field when we started, so empty in fact that we had to get the government surveyor in to determine where our piece of empty field ended and the neighbours' empty fields began. We surveyed the land, fenced it, dug a well and started a nursery of trees. The well didn't produce any water, so we ended up running a pipe to a neighbour's well and buying from him. For about three years I put in several hours a day in this garden, growing trees and flowers. It was a tough time to start a project like this because there was a drought in the area. The monsoon failed several years in a row. A house was started for Lakshmana Swamy and Saradamma, but work was halted when the water ran out. We could have shipped water in tankers, but we discovered that it was too saline to be used in building work. The water would have corroded the steel inside the cement. When the work stopped, I ended up being the night watchman there. The house was full of tools and cement bags, but there were no doors and windows to protect them. I think I slept on this building site for most of a year, watching the property and waiting for the rains to come so that the work could continue. For two summers in a row I bought water in tankers to keep the garden alive. Every well in the neighbourhood was completely dry.

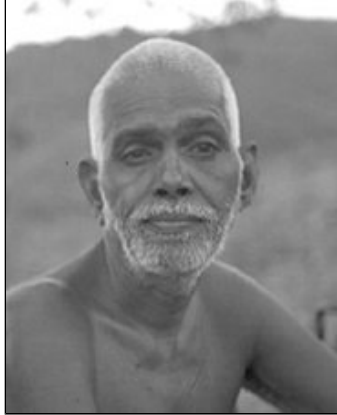
I was still living in [Ramanasramam](#), working on my project to collect and edit the stories of Ramana devotees. Sometime in 1990 I wrote to Papaji in Lucknow, asking him if he would be willing to contribute his story to the book. He wrote back, saying that he would be happy to have his story included, but he added that he

didn't want to write it down himself. He asked me to submit a questionnaire, and he would then do his best to answer it by giving verbal answers that would be recorded on tape. This seemed like a good suggestion. It took him a few months to get round to it, but when he finally did, he spent at least an hour talking about his early life and his association with Bhagavan. There seemed to be a few major discrepancies in his account, but when I wrote, asking for clarification, he just repeated the same stories all over again. In 1992 I decided to go and see him in the hope of getting his story straightened out. I spent a chaotic two weeks with him, chaotic because his wife died about three days after I arrived, which meant a major disruption to his usual routine. His family descended en masse, there was a trip to Hardwar to immerse the ashes in the Ganga, but in between all these comings and goings I managed to get most of the information I had been looking for. A lot of it came in a last-minute interview I had with him about an hour before my train was due to leave. It was that kind of trip.

Back in Tiruvannamalai I went through all my notes and put together a fifty-page version of his life that focused on his early life and the meetings he had had with Bhagavan. At the time I wasn't interested in anything that came after 1950. I submitted it with some hesitancy because there were still a few events that I couldn't place in the right order, but he seemed to love it. He invited me back to Lucknow, telling me that he had many more stories he wanted to tell me. I went back in March 1993, intending to stay for a short time, but I ended up staying there until he passed away in 1997.

Next: [I was touched by the faith he showed on these occasions.](#)

Mostly About Books
Michelle Mikklesen interviews David Godman
Page 3



Sri Ramana Maharshi

Michelle: What was the attraction? What made you decide to stay, and stay so long?

David: First of all, I felt his power and I felt his peace. Here was a man in the Ramana lineage, promulgating his teachings and radiating a kind of tangible *sakti* that shut up the minds of the people around him, and in some cases gave them temporary experiences of the Self. It was a heady, intoxicating environment in which people were having amazing experiences almost every day. On top of that there was the promise of getting more extraordinary stories from him. My first trip there had been a kind of smash and grab raid. I had come with very limited time. With all the funeral events going on I had had to remind him constantly that our time was limited and that I wanted to talk to him about his life. Second time round I waited for him to take the initiative, but strangely enough he didn't. Having invited me there to tell stories, he never showed any interest in doing so.

Within two weeks of my arrival I was given a book project that someone else couldn't deal with. A German doctor, Gabby, had been asked to collect interviews that Papaji had had with various visitors and arrange them in book form. She was struggling a bit with this because she wasn't a native English speaker. I was asked to help her, and when she left Lucknow a few weeks later, I inherited the whole project. I wanted to take my time and do it properly, but Papaji wanted it to be brought out in a hurry. He didn't seem to have much patience with long, drawn-out projects. His motto seemed to be 'Do it, and do it now!'

I gave him samples every day to read and it took me a while to work out what kind of style he liked. I finally succeeded when I gave him a manuscript just before he ate his lunch. He took it back to his bedroom after lunch and read it in his room. When I went to the house again around four, there was a big water melon waiting for me with my name on it, and when I next saw him he exclaimed, 'This is just what I want! Where's the rest of it? I want to read the rest of it.' He seemed disappointed that I couldn't

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In this page:

[What work did you start when you came back here? What are you working on now?](#)

[You are now publishing your own books. What made you take that decision?](#)

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Dutch Translation of
this interview by
Peter Roosendaal



[Mikklesen](#)
[Nederlands](#)

suddenly produce a whole book out of thin air at a moment's notice.

After that, knowing what he wanted, the work was easy. I think I finished it in about two months, which was probably still too slow for Papaji's liking. This was [Papaji Interviews](#), by the way.

One other reason for the slowness was that Papaji also got me involved in a film project. An American film-maker, Jim Lemkin, arrived in Lucknow and asked if he could make a documentary about Papaji and his teachings. Papaji agreed and sent me along as a kind of advisor, interviewer and general consultant. I don't know why I got this job. I had never worked on a film before in my life. Within about three months we had the film ready. I had spent my first three months in Lucknow finishing somebody else's book and helping Jim with his film. There was no sign however, that Papaji was willing to start talking about any of the incidents he had promised to tell me. I dropped several hints, but no business resulted.

After a few months I suggested that he could just sit in front of a camera and tell all the main stories of his life. I didn't know what else to do to start him talking.

I couldn't do that,' he replied. 'I would need some notes to remind me which stories I wanted to tell.'

This sounded like another excuse to put off the answering, so I decided to push the issue a little.

'No problem,' I said. 'I'll make the notes for you. I'll make a list of every story I have ever heard you tell, and every incident I have heard about your life, and I will arrange them in chronological order. You can go through the list one by one and answer any that appeal to you.'

I got no answer to that one, but I went ahead and made the list anyway. I gave it to him one afternoon while he was having his afternoon tea. He seemed to be very excited by the first few questions, saying what good questions they were, and how much he would enjoy talking about them. Then he turned the page and realised that it wasn't two pages he had to go through. It was sixteen.

His face dropped and his enthusiasm vanished. 'This is a very long list,' he said, all excitement gone.

'Well,' I said, 'you have had a very long life, and it has been full of interesting incidents.'

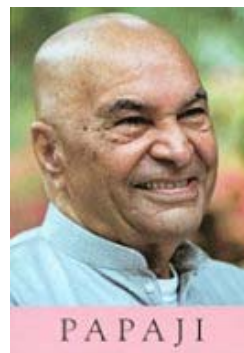
I was hoping I hadn't blown my chance by overloading him with questions.

'I'll have to go through it,' he said. 'I'll make notes in the margins about what I want to talk about.'

That seemed to be good news. At least he was going to try.

The list of questions stayed in his bedroom for several months, completely unread so far as I could ascertain. I would occasionally mention it to him and he would reply that he was working on it. Whatever he was doing, he wasn't doing it with the papers in his hand.

In 1994 I received news that Annamalai Swami wanted me to print his book. I approached Papaji and asked him what I should concentrate on. I should mention at this point that I had unofficially inherited another project that was known as the "Om Shanti" book. In 1992 and early 1993 Papaji began his daily



[Papaji Interviews](#)



Annamalai Swami

satsangs with a brief talk on whatever he felt inspired to speak about that day. These had been transcribed and there was a plan to make a book of them. At one point Catherine Ingram was supposed to be doing this, but when she wrote to Papaji, saying that she couldn't do it, she added 'Maybe David can do it instead'.

Papaji read out the letter and said, 'Yes, David can do it'. I was sitting in a far corner of the room at the time, but he never looked at me, and he never officially asked me to start the work. Since I didn't particularly want the job - I had enough on my plate already - I never asked him about it myself until this meeting I had with him in 1994.

I explained to him, 'I have been asked to go to Tamil Nadu to make sure this Annamalai Swami book gets printed properly. You said indirectly that you wanted me to edit this "Om Shanti" book, and the questions about your biography are all still pending. What do you want me to do, and in what order?'

'How near is the 'Om Shanti' book to completion?' he asked.

'There's one version available,' I answered, 'but no one likes it. If I took up that work, I would probably have to start from scratch and do it all again. It would probably take several months.'

'OK,' he said. 'we don't want that project any more. It's not necessary. Go back to Tiruvannamalai, print your new book, and when you come back we will start on my biography.'

This was just what I wanted to hear. I had permission to go away and print Annamalai Swami's book, I had got myself out of a job that I didn't really want to do, and I had received a promise that he would start work on my main project as soon as I returned from the south.

That's not what happened though. Things rarely go according to plan when Papaji is concerned. As soon as I left the house to go to South India, he sent someone out to buy a big foolscap notebook. He took my questionnaire from his bedroom, blew the dust off it, and began to answer all the questions by writing them out in this book. The people who were there said he spent several hours a day patiently going through all my sixteen pages of questions. It must have been very uncomfortable for him. It was summer, there were frequent power cuts, and he had a brace on his neck because he was suffering from spondylitis. That made it hard for him to look down and see the page he was writing on. He stuck at it, though, day after day, and when I finally returned he had written almost 150 pages. The moment I walked in the house, he put his pen down and wouldn't write any more. I have thought about this many times, but I still can't come up with any sensible conjectures. Why did he have to wait half a year until I was out of town to start writing his memoirs, and why did he stop the moment I returned? He had asked me to be his official biographer, but he seemed to be incapable of answering questions when I was around. I should add that no one would ever accuse him of being shy or diffident. If he wanted to do something, he did it, and if he wanted to say something, no social convention on politeness would prevent him from saying exactly what he wanted to say. He was a bulldozer in everything he did.

These handwritten stories were just what I needed to start my book. There were many incidents I had never heard before, along with good versions of stories that I already knew. I got myself organised. I found myself a computer; I recruited volunteers who



Papaji, in a neck brace, answering my questionnaire

[\(Click on image to enlarge\)](#)



Papaji, me, and a cobra on a bridge in Hardwar in 1993.

[\(Click on image to enlarge\)](#)

were willing to listen to all the old satsang tapes in order to find all the different versions of the stories he told; I started collecting letters from all the people he had written to over the years; I wrote to everyone whose address appeared in his address book; and I started interviewing everyone I knew who had been connected with him. It was a long, long job, but it was immensely rewarding. I discovered so many people from all over the world who had been utterly transformed by Papaji, sometimes after only a single meeting with him. Whenever I needed supplementary information, I would write out a list of questions and he would give me written answers. He seemed to prefer this format when he dealt with matters pertaining to his life story. However, whenever I asked him questions about his teachings, he would take the list to satsang and give answers there so that everyone could immediately benefit from what he had to say.

For most of his life Papaji forbade his devotees from talking about him. He wanted a high level of secrecy to guard his privacy. When I started writing to old devotees, asking for their stories, they immediately wrote back to Papaji, asking what they should do. I had told them all in my letters that I was doing this with Papaji's permission, but, quite rightly, they all felt a need to check. Papaji encouraged and in some cases even ordered these people to tell me their stories. Some people told me about incidents they hadn't even mentioned to other members of their own family.

Every time I finished a chapter, I would give it to Papaji to read and check. At first he would go through it in his house and then later take it to the morning satsang and read it out there. Later, though, he would just say, 'Put it in the satsang bag. I'll read it tomorrow.' I have to say that I was touched by the faith he showed on these occasions. I don't think I would volunteer to read out a biography of myself in front of 200 people without first checking to see what was in it. In the beginning he would make a few corrections, but once I got the hang of how he liked to have his stories presented, he rarely touched any of them. He even stopped reading with a pen in his hand. In the last few hundred pages the only things he changed were the spellings of the names of a few Indian devotees that I had misspelled because I had never seen them written down before. He finished the last portion about a month before he passed away in 1997.

Sometimes I wish that I had worked a bit harder so that I could have presented him with a copy of the first book, but that wasn't ready until the middle of 1998.

After Papaji passed away in September 1997 I finished work on [*Nothing Ever Happened*](#) and came back to Tiruvannamalai, and I have been here more or less ever since.

Michelle: What work did you start when you came back here? What are you working on now?

David: I did nothing for a while. I took a break from writing. I didn't feel like doing anything new. Until the middle of 1998 there were proofs of [*Nothing Ever Happened*](#) to go through, but after that I had a complete break from book work for about a year. Papaji had asked me to edit his Lucknow satsangs for him and bring them out in book form. He even told me what format to use.



Papaji, Almira and myself in our Lucknow home.
(Click on image to enlarge)

For more information about Papaji, please go to:

<http://www.poonja.com/>



[*Nothing Ever Happened*](#)

That's a big job and I have only just started on it.

In 1999 I suddenly remembered the reminiscences project I had started in the 1980s. Two books on Annamalai Swami and four books on Papaji had sidetracked me for a decade, but when one of my friends here asked to have a look at one of the unpublished chapters, I took everything out of its folder and read it for the first time in maybe ten years. Realising that I still had plenty of good material that deserved to be printed, I started to organise it into book form. That particular project, *The Power of the Presence* in three volumes, started about two years ago and ended quite recently when I finally received the last volume from the press.

Michelle: You are now publishing your own books. What made you take that decision?

David: In the middle of 2000 I approached Penguin in Delhi to see if they would be interested in bringing out the series that later came out as *The Power of the Presence*. I also wanted to see if they might be willing to bring out an Indian edition of *Nothing Ever Happened* since it is far too expensive for most Indians to buy. Right now, only the American edition exists. Its \$45 price translates as over Rs 2,100 in this country. Hardly anyone can afford that kind of price here.

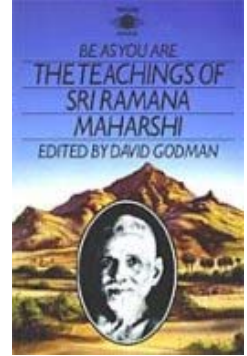
When I went to see the commissioning editor for spiritual books in the headquarters of Penguin India in Delhi, the woman I spoke to claimed that *Be As You Are* was not a Penguin book, and that the office had no record of either the book or me. I couldn't believe she was serious, but she was. The book has been continuously in print in its Indian Penguin edition for more than ten years but there was no trace of it, she said, either in their catalogues or on their computers. I decided I didn't want to deal with a company that could lose titles and authors so completely that no record of them showed up on their computers. It wasn't just the English edition she had lost. She didn't know anything about the versions that had been brought out in several Indian languages.

I have always had bad experiences with commercial publishers. When *Be As You Are* first came out in the mid-80s, the original publisher didn't tell me it was out, and didn't even send me a copy. The first copy I ever saw came from a friend of mine who bought it in a second-hand bookstore.

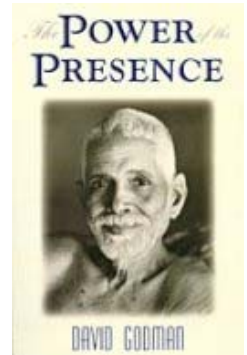
I decided in the end to publish *The Power of the Presence* myself. I find it quite rewarding to be involved in everything from the original idea to distribution and marketing points several thousand miles away.

Michelle: Other than the new Papaji books, is there anything else in the pipeline?

David: I am working on a new presentation of Bhagavan's teachings that I hope will come out around the end of the year. It will be based on teaching statements by Bhagavan that were recorded by Muruganar in a Tamil work entitled *Sri Ramana Padamalai*. That will probably be the title of the book when it comes out. There are also a few other possibilities, but they are so vague, I don't really want to start talking about them. I think I have

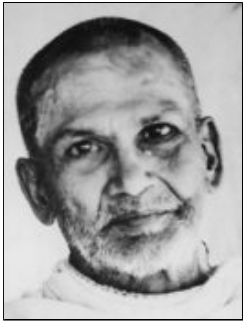


[Be As You Are](#)



[The Power of the Presence](#)

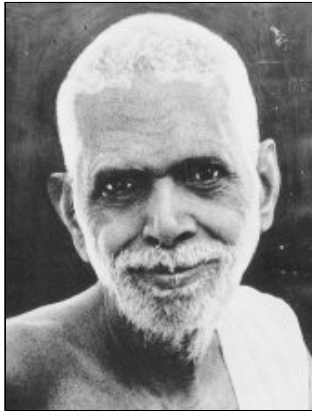
said enough for one afternoon. I haven't talked this much for months and I think my voice is going. Come back in a year and ask me 'What's new?' and I might have something more to tell you. That's enough for now



Muruganar

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Sri Ramana Maharshi

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[Is Self-realization difficult or rare? Is it rare because people don't practice self-inquiry properly?](#)

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Maalok: Ramana Maharshi has had a lasting influence on your life. For those of us who don't know much about the Maharshi, could you please share some of the salient aspects of his life that have influenced you deeply.

[Click here for a Tamil Translation of this interview \(PDF\)](#)

David: About two or three times a year someone asks me this question, 'Summarize Ramana Maharshi's life and teachings in a few words for people who know little or nothing about him'. It's always hard to know where to start with a question like this.

Let me say first that Ramana Maharshi was one of the most highly regarded and widely respected spiritual figures that twentieth-century India produced. I can't think of any other candidate who is as persistently held out to be an example of all that is best in the Hindu spiritual tradition. Everyone reveres him as the perfect example of what a true saint and sage ought to be.

How did this come about? While he was still in his teens Sri Ramana underwent a remarkable, spontaneous experience in which his individuality died, leaving him in a state in which he found his true identity to be the Self, the immanent and transcendent substratum. It was a permanent awakening that was truly remarkable because he had not previously had any interest in spiritual matters. He left his family home a few weeks later, without telling anyone where he was going, and spent the remainder of his life at the foot of Arunachala, a holy mountain and pilgrimage center that is about 120 miles south west of Chennai.

After a few years there - a period in which he was largely oblivious to the world and his body - he began to attract devotees because there was a spiritual radiance emanating from him that many people around him experienced as peace or happiness. This, I think, is the secret of his subsequent fame and popularity. He didn't get a reputation for being a great sage because of what he did or said. It came about because people, who arrived at his ashram with all kinds of questions and doubts, suddenly found

themselves becoming quiet, peaceful and happy in his presence. There was a continuous, benign flow of energy coming off him that somehow evaporated the mental anxieties and busy minds of the people who came to see him. He didn't ask people to come. People just came of their own accord. A 19th century American author once wrote that if you invent a better mousetrap, even if you try to hide yourself in the woods, people will beat a path to your door. People beat a path to Sri Ramana's door - for many years he lived in very inaccessible places - because he had something far better than an improved mousetrap to offer; he had a natural ability to induce peace in the people around him.

Let me expand on this because this is the key to understanding both his state and the effect he had on other people. When he had his final experience at the age of sixteen, his mind, his sense of being an individual person vanished forever, leaving him in a state of unassailable peace. He realized and understood that this was not some new experience that was mediated by and through his 'I', his sense of being an individual person. It was, instead, his natural state, something that is there all the time, but which is only experienced when the mind and its perpetual busy-ness is absent. By abiding in this natural and effortless state of inner silence he somehow charged up the atmosphere around him with a healing, quietening energy. People who came to see him spontaneously became happy, peaceful and quiet. Why? Because Sri Ramana himself was effortlessly broadcasting his own experience of happiness, peace and quietude in such a way that those people who were around him got an inner taste, an inner flavor of this natural state that is inherent to all of us. I should say that this power was not restricted to his physical vicinity, although it did seem to be stronger there. People who merely thought about him wherever they happened to be discovered that they could experience something of this peace simply through having this mental contact with him.

So, having given that background, I can now answer the question: 'Who was Ramana Maharshi and what were his teachings?'

Sri Ramana Maharshi was a living embodiment of peace and happiness and his 'teachings' were the emanations of that state which helped other people to find and experience their own inner happiness and peace.

If all this sounds a little abstract, let me tell you a story that was passed on to me by Arthur Osborne's daughter. In the 1940s their house was a kind of dormitory for all the stray foreigners who couldn't find anywhere else to stay near Sri Ramana's ashram. A miserable, crabby woman appeared one evening, having been sent by the ashram. They put her up, gave her breakfast and sent her off to see Sri Ramana the next morning. She came back at lunchtime looking absolutely radiant. She was glowing with happiness. The whole family was waiting to hear the story of what happened, but she never said anything about her visit to the ashram. Everyone in the house was expecting some dramatic story: 'He looked at me and this happened,' or 'I asked a question and then I had this great experience.' As the lunch plates were being cleared away, her hosts could not contain their curiosity any longer.

'What happened?' asked one of them. 'What did Bhagavan do

to you? What did he say to you?'

The woman looked most surprised. 'He didn't do anything. He didn't say anything to me. I just sat there for the whole morning and then came back for lunch.'

She had been just one new person sitting in a crowd of people, but the power coming off Sri Ramana had been enough to wash away a lifetime of depression, leaving her with a taste of what lay underneath it: her own inherent, natural happiness and peace.

Sri Ramana knew that transformations such as these were going on around him all the time, but he never accepted responsibility for them. He would never say, 'I transformed this woman'. When he was asked about the effect he was having on people, he would sometimes say that by continuously abiding in his own natural state of peace, a *sannidhi*, a powerful presence, was somehow created that automatically took care of the mental problems of the people who visited him. By abiding in silence as silence, this energy field was created, a field that miraculously transformed the people around him.

Your original question was, 'Why has Ramana Maharshi influenced me so much?' The answer is, 'I came into his *sannidhi* and through its catalytic activity I discovered my own peace, my own happiness.'

Maalok: If somebody wants to start practicing the teachings of Ramana Maharshi, where and how should they start?

David: This is another classic question: 'What should I do?' However, the question itself is misconceived. It is based on the erroneous assumption that happiness and peace are states that can be experienced by striving, by effort. The busy mind covers up the peace and the silence that is your own natural state, so if you put the mind in gear and use it to pursue some spiritual goal, you are usually taking it away from the peace, not towards it. This is a hard concept for many people to grasp.

People found their own inner peace in Sri Ramana's presence because they didn't interfere with the energy that was eradicating their minds, their sense of being a particular person who has ideas, beliefs, and so on. The true practice of Sri Ramana's teachings is remaining quiet, remaining in a state of inner mental quiescence that allows the power of Sri Ramana to seep into your heart and transform you. This can be summarized in one of Sri Ramana's classic comments: 'Just keep quiet. Bhagavan will do the rest.'

If you use the phrase 'practicing the teachings,' the following sequence is assumed: that Sri Ramana speaks of some goal that has to be attained, that he gives you some route, some practice, to reach that goal, and that you then use your mind to vigorously move towards that goal. The mind wants to be in charge of this operation. It wants to listen to the Guru, understand what is required, and then use itself to move in the prescribed direction. All this is wrong. Mind is not the vehicle one uses to carry out the teachings; it is, instead, the obstacle that prevents one from directly experiencing them. The only useful, productive thing the mind can do is disappear.

Sri Ramana himself always said that his true teachings were given out in silence. Those who were receptive to them were the

ones who could get out of the way mentally, allowing Sri Ramana's silent emanations to work on them. In the benedictory verse to his philosophical poem *Ulladu Narpadu* Sri Ramana wrote, and I paraphrase a little: 'Who can meditate on that which alone exists. One cannot meditate on it because one is not apart from it. One can only *be* it.' This is the essence of Sri Ramana's teachings. 'Be what you are and remain as you are without having any thoughts. Don't try to meditate *on* the Self, *on* God. Just abide silently at the source of the mind and you will experience that you *are* God, that you *are* the Self.'

Maalok: Did the Maharshi give some guidelines on the kind of life one should lead? Activities that would help spiritual quests? I mean mundane things such as eating, sleeping, drinking, talking, family, marriage, sexuality, etc.

David: I think the key word here is 'moderation'. On several occasions he said that moderation in eating, sleeping and speaking were the best aids to *sadhana*. He didn't approve of or encourage excess of any kind. He didn't, for example, encourage people to take vows of silence. He used to say, 'If you can't keep your mind still, what is the point of keeping your tongue still?'

Though he encouraged devotees to live decent, upright lives, he never imposed rigorous moral codes on them. He was happy if devotees took to *brahmacharya* naturally, but he didn't see much point in suppressing sexual desires. Someone once told him that in Sri Aurobindo Ashram, the men and the women slept separately, even if they were married. His response was, 'What is the point of sleeping separately if the desires are still there?' If people who had desires and wanted to get rid of them came to him for advice, he would usually say that meditation would make them lose their strength. According to Sri Ramana, you don't get rid of desires by suppressing them, or by not indulging in them, you get rid of them by putting your attention on the Self.

He didn't look down on people who were married as people who had succumbed to their desires. He once told Rangan, one of his married devotees, that it was easier to realize the Self as a householder than as a *sannyasin*.

Sri Ramana didn't think that renouncing habits or possessions was very beneficial. Instead, he asked people to go to the root of the problem and renounce the idea that they were individual people occupying bodies. He would sometimes say that even if you give up your job, your family and all your responsibilities and go to a cave and meditate, you still have to take your mind with you. While that mind is still there, exercising its tyranny, you haven't really renounced anything that will do you any good in the long term.

Maalok: When the topic of Ramana Maharshi's teachings comes up, most people think of self-inquiry, the practice of asking oneself 'Who am I?' You haven't even mentioned this.

David: I'm laying the foundation, as they say in court. I'm trying to put it in a proper perspective. People came to Sri Ramana with the standard seekers' question: 'What do I have to do to get enlightened?' One of his standard replies was the Tamil phrase

'*Summa iru*'. '*Summa*' means 'quiet' or 'still' and '*iru*' is the imperative of both the verb to be and the verb to stay. So, you can translate this as 'Be quiet,' 'Be still,' 'Stay quiet,' 'Remain still,' and so on. This was his primary advice.

However, he knew that most people couldn't naturally stay quiet. If such people asked for a method, a technique, he would often recommend a practice known as self-inquiry. This is probably what he is most famous for. To understand what it is, how it works, and how it is to be practiced, I need to digress a little into Sri Ramana's views on the nature of the mind.

Sri Ramana taught that the individual self is an unreal, imaginary entity that persists because we never properly investigate its true nature. The sense of 'I', the feeling of being a particular person who inhabits a particular body, only persists because we continuously identify ourselves with thoughts, beliefs, emotions, objects, and so on. The 'I' never stands alone by itself; it always exists in association: 'I am John,' 'I am angry,' 'I am a lawyer,' 'I am a woman,' etc. These identifications are automatic and unconscious. We don't make them through volition on a moment-to-moment basis. They are just the unchallenged assumptions that lie behind all our experiences and habits. Sri Ramana asks us to disentangle ourselves from all these associations by putting full attention on the subject 'I', and in doing so, prevent it from attaching itself to any ideas, beliefs, thoughts and emotions that come its way.

The classic way of doing this is to start with some experienced feeling or thought. I may be thinking about what I am going to eat for dinner, for example. So, I ask myself, 'Who is anticipating dinner?' and the answer, whether you express it or not, is 'I am'. Then you ask yourself, 'Who am I? Who or what is this "I" that is waiting for its next meal?' This is not an invitation to undertake an intellectual analysis of what is going on in the mind; it is instead a device for transferring attention from the object of thought - the forthcoming dinner - to the subject, the person who is having that particular thought. In that moment simply abide as the 'I' itself and try to experience subjectively what it is when it is shorn of all identifications and associations with things and thoughts. It will be a fleeting moment for most people because it is the nature of the mind to keep itself busy. You will soon find yourself in a new train of thought, a new series of associations. Each time this happens, ask yourself, 'Who is daydreaming?' 'Who is worried about her doctor's bill?' 'Who is thinking about the weather?' and so on. The answer in each case will be 'I'. Hold onto that experience of the unassociated 'I' for as long as you can. Watch how it arises, and, more importantly, watch where it subsides to when there are no thoughts to engage with.

This is the next stage of the inquiry. If you can isolate the feeling of 'I' from all the things that it habitually attaches itself to, you will discover that it starts to disappear. As it subsides and becomes more and more attenuated, one begins to experience the emanations of peace and joy that are, in reality, your own natural state. You don't normally experience these because your busy mind keeps them covered up, but they are there all the time, and when you begin to switch the mind off, that's what you experience.

It's a kind of mental archaeology. The gold, the treasure, the

inherent happiness of your own true state, is in there, waiting for you, but you don't look for it. You are not even aware of it, because all you see, all you know, are the layers that have accumulated on top of it. Your digging tool is this continuous awareness of 'I'. It takes you away from the thoughts, and back to your real Self, which is peace and happiness. Sri Ramana once compared this process to a dog that holds onto the scent of its master in order to track him down. Following the unattached 'I' will take you home, back to the place where no individual 'I' has ever existed.

This is self-inquiry, and this is the method by which it should be practiced. Hold on to the sense of 'I', and whenever you get distracted by other things revert to it again. I should mention that this was not something that Sri Ramana said should be done as a meditation practice. It is something that should be going on inside you all the time, irrespective of what the body is doing.

Though Sri Ramana said that this was the most effective tool for realizing the Self, it must be said that very few people actually achieved this goal. For most of us the mind is just too stubborn to be overcome by this or any other technique. However, the effort put into self-inquiry is never wasted. In fact, it's a win-win situation for most people; either you get enlightened, or you just get peaceful and happy.

Maalok: Listening to your answer above - that very few people achieved the goal of Self-realization even when practicing self-enquiry - people could be discouraged to even try. Perhaps in this context it would be helpful for you to elaborate on what is meant by complete Self-realization? Is Self-realization difficult or rare? Is it rare because people don't practice self-inquiry properly?

David: Self-realization is the definitive ending of the experience of the individual 'I'. It is a permanent state of knowing awareness, that contains, inherent within it, the understanding that one's true identity is the substratum out of which the world and all its names and forms appear. Many people have brief glimpses of this reality, but lose them when the mind, the individual 'I' reasserts itself. I believe that the permanent eradication of this sense of being an individual person is a rare event, although I know many people who would disagree with me on this subject.

I once asked Nisargadatta Maharaj why some people, such as Ramana Maharshi, realized the self very quickly through a single act of self-inquiry, whereas others spent fifty years meditating and failed to reach the same state. I was curious to hear his answer because I knew that at this stage of his teaching career he was persistently maintaining that reincarnation did not happen. This meant that he couldn't say that people such as Sri Ramana arrived in this world with an advantage over other people who might not have done as much meditation in their previous lives.

In his reply he said that some people were born with a pure 'chemical' and some were not. I think he got the 'chemical' analogy from the layer of chemicals that coats a film. From what I gathered talking to him, we are all issued with a film for our life, that is to say, a more-or-less pre-determined script that plays itself out as our lives. The quality of the chemical is determined by a



*Nisargadatta
Maharaj*

coming together of all sorts of factors that are mostly prevalent at the time of conception: our parents' genes, astrological configurations, the environment we are due to be brought up in were a few that he named. Those who have the good luck to be issued with a good chemical realize the Self, and those who have a bad or dirty chemical never do, irrespective of how much they try.

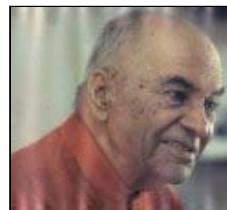
When I commented that this all sounded very deterministic, and that there didn't seem to be much point in spiritual effort if the quality of our issued chemical determined whether or not we got enlightened or not, he said that some people came into the world with a chemical that was only very slightly impure. These people, he said, could realize the Self by associating with a realized teacher and by having a strong and earnest desire to know and be the truth. In this particular model, the people who meditate or do self-inquiry for years without success are not necessarily doing it wrongly or badly, they are simply in the unfortunate majority whose chemical is so impure, no amount of effort will clarify it. And since there is no reincarnation, the effort these people make is not carried forward into future lives.

I found this unique model - I have never heard or read about this theory anywhere else - to be quite perplexing. In the years that I was going to see Nisargadatta Maharaj, the front cover of *I Am That*, his own book of teachings, contained a detailed statement by him on how reincarnation took place. Yet, during the last years of his life, I never once heard him admit that reincarnation was true, or say that effort or maturity in one life could be carried forward into another.

The disciples of Sri Ramana I have been with, such as Lakshmana Swamy and Papaji, have all said that spiritual effort in past lives is carried forward, making it possible for enlightenment to happen relatively quickly in the final birth. When I asked Lakshmana Swamy why he had realized the Self so quickly in this life, he said that he had finished his work in previous lives, and Papaji said he had memories of being a yogi in South India in his previous life.

Sri Ramana never talked about his previous lives, although he did concede once that he must have had a Guru in some other life. I personally feel that he completed all his spiritual work in some other body and arrived in his final birth in a state of such utter purity and readiness that enlightenment came to him virtually unasked while he was still in his teens.

I think people need to take a long-term view when they take to self-inquiry or any other practice. It's not bad to think of enlightenment as something that might occur at any moment, in fact I think it's a laudable attitude to have, but at the same time one should not be disappointed if it doesn't happen. For many people, asking oneself 'Who am I?' is chipping away at a mountain of ignorance and mental conditioning. It may bear fruit in this life, but if it doesn't, the benefits will be carried forward to some other incarnation. Meanwhile, the practice, if it is carried out regularly, will give you enough peace and quiet to justify the investment of time and energy you put into it, here and now.



Papaji

*For more information
about Papaji, please
go to:*

<http://www.poonja.com/>

Next: [The more accurately you explain Ramana Maharshi's teachings, the fewer people you will find are interested in](#)

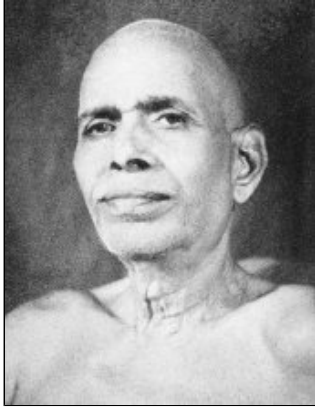
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Living the Inspiration of Sri Ramana Maharshi

A dialogue between David Godman and Maalok, an Indian academic now teaching in America

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[What about the people who are doing things with deepest devotion and faith but perhaps don't have a good idea of what needs to be done](#)

[How did you gather the material for the biographies you have written?](#)

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Maalok: In my experience there is a tendency among many people to convert the 'Who Am I?' technique into a mantra and repeat it. Is this a good method?

David: In the Second World War American troops took over an isolated Pacific island that had never been exposed to western civilization before. They built a runway and flew in a vast amount of supplies for their military personnel. The locals, some of whom were still hunter-gatherers, ended up with many of the leftovers.

When the war was over, the Americans departed, leaving behind a runway and some abandoned buildings. The local tribals wanted the American bounty to continue, but they didn't know how to bring it about. They were clueless about geopolitics and technology. They had seen large birds descend from the sky and deposit an unimaginable amount of goodies on the runway. They had never really bothered to find out why these strangers were on their island, or how these exotic goods were manufactured and brought to the island.

They set up altars on the runway and started to perform their own religious rites there in an attempt to entice the big metal birds back to their island. These practices became a kind of religion that anthropologists labeled 'cargo-cult'.

I mention all this because many people try to do self-inquiry without really understanding how it works and why it works, and this lack of understanding leads them to do many practices that are not real self-inquiry, and which consequently will not produce the desired results. If I may pursue this analogy a little further, there is self-inquiry and there is cargo-cult inquiry, and to understand the difference between the two, you have to know how and why self-inquiry works.

In self-inquiry one is isolating the individual 'I', and by doing so one is making the mind, the individual self, sink back into its source and vanish. Any technique that encourages the mind to associate with objects or thoughts is not self-inquiry, and it will not make the mind disappear. On the contrary, it will make the mind stronger. When you repeat 'Who am I? Who am I?' the subject 'I' is concentrating on an object of thought, the phrase

'Who am I?' This does not lead to the disassociation of the 'I' from its thoughts; it keeps it enmeshed in them.

The same comment can be made about practices that associate self-inquiry with concentration on a particular place in the body. A lot of people have this misconception. If you are focussing on a place in the body, you are associating the subject 'I' with an object of perception - whatever spot you are concentrating on. This is not self-inquiry, and you will never cause the 'I' to vanish in this way. Any technique that puts attention on a thought or a perception or a feeling that is not 'I' is not self-inquiry. If you think it is, you are practicing cargo-cult inquiry. You are following a ritual or a practice that derives from an incorrect understanding of how the mind comes into existence, and how it can be made to disappear. Your likelihood of success will be the same as the islanders who tried to entice planes out of the sky with religious ceremonies.

Maalok: But doesn't faith and devotion have a role? What about the people who are doing things with deepest devotion and faith but perhaps don't have a good idea of what needs to be done (or undone in this case)?

David: I'm not criticizing faith or devotion here. I'm simply saying that there's an effective way of doing self-inquiry and an ineffective way, and that one understands the difference by understanding Sri Ramana's teachings on the nature of the 'I': how it rises, and on how it can be made to subside.

If you have complete faith in a realized teacher, and complete devotion to him or her, that in itself will take you to the goal. You won't need to bother with anything else, and you won't even care about anything else. The best example of this I have ever come across is Mathru Sri Sarada, a devotee of Lakshmana Swamy who realized the Self solely on account of her intense love and devotion towards him. In the 1970s she was doing *japa* of his name and concentrating on a photo of him for up to twenty hours a day, and in the remaining four hours, while she was asleep, she would often be dreaming about him. This wasn't merely intense concentration; it was accompanied by an intense, uninterrupted flow of love towards him. Lakshmana Swamy has said that at times, the flow was so strong, it kept him awake at night. He once asked her to moderate the flow a little so that he could get some sleep, but she couldn't do it. That love was flowing continuously, twenty-four hours a day to the object of her devotion, and in the end, the power of her love brought about her realization.

You need that much love to realize the Self through this method, and if you are hoping to realize the Self through self-inquiry, you need the same kind of commitment and intensity on your spiritual path.

Maalok: It is said that Ramana Maharshi was clear that mere mantra *japa* and mental imagery can be obstacles to Self-realization. Is this correct? Is it also true that he allowed and even encouraged many people to continue their spiritual practices even if they were not quite consistent with his strong preference for the method of self-inquiry? If he thought that self-inquiry was so beneficial, why did he not encourage

everyone who came to him for advice to do it?

David: There are several different questions here. I will answer them one by one.

When people came to Sri Ramana for the first time, they would often ask for spiritual advice. Sri Ramana would generally reply, 'What practice are you following right now?' If they said they were worshipping some particular deity, or repeating a mantra, he would usually say, 'Good, you can carry on with that'.

He recognized that different people were attracted to different paths, and he knew that many people found self-inquiry difficult or uninspiring. He was not a dictator. Everyone in his ashram was quite free to follow any spiritual path. No one was compelled to study Sri Ramana's teachings, and no one was compelled to follow a particular practice.

Quite often devotees would find, after a few months, that they were no longer interested in their old practices. They would again come to see Sri Ramana and ask him what they should do. When this happened Sri Ramana might suggest self-inquiry, but he would never force a change.

However, some people went up to him and said, 'I am not following any particular practice at the moment, but I want to get enlightened. What is the quickest and most direct way of accomplishing this?'

I think that such a questioner would invariably be told to do self-inquiry.

There is a nice story about a group of villagers who came to see Sri Ramana in the 1920s. One of them asked for the best technique to realize the Self, and Sri Ramana advised him to do self-inquiry. A senior devotee later expressed a doubt that this advice was appropriate. He thought that such people ought to be told to do some form of *japa*.

When Sri Ramana heard about this comment, he said, 'Why should I cheat people who come to me and ask for the best technique? He asked this question, so I gave him the right answer.'

If people wanted to do self-inquiry, Sri Ramana always encouraged them to do it, but if they felt drawn to other paths, he never tried to push them into doing something that they didn't feel comfortable with. If you go through the published dialogues that visitors had with Sri Ramana you can find several instances of Sri Ramana recommending self-inquiry to people who didn't seem enthusiastic about doing it. When he sensed their hesitation, he would ask them to follow some other practice instead.

This leads on to one of your other questions. What role did devotional practices, such as *japa* or meditation on a visual image or symbol of God, have in Sri Ramana's teachings? He always said that there were only two ways to get enlightened: either do self-inquiry or completely surrender to God or the Guru. He never belittled devotion to names and forms of the divinity.

Many of the people who were following the path of surrender would do *japa* of some holy name. Sri Ramana approved of this whole-heartedly, but he did on occasion say that such practices would only bring results if one had love towards the name that one was repeating, or the form that one was concentrating on. This is an important distinction to note. You can repeat a

particular name of God all day, but this will only be an exercise in concentration if there is no love, no devotion towards the name that is being repeated. Such repetitions will make the mental muscles stronger in the same way that repeated exercise makes the body's muscles stronger. They will not make the mind disappear. However, if one can chant the name of God with love, not just with concentration, this will ultimately make the mind dissolve into God and become God.

Maalok: A curious thing happened the other day during my visit to Delhi. I accompanied my niece to a famous bookstore in Delhi. They had a big section on spirituality. I scanned the section carefully only to find not a single book on Ramana Maharshi. On inquiring, the bookstore manager told me that books on Ramana Maharshi are simply not popular and don't sell easily. Being the editor and author of significant books on Ramana Maharshi and his disciples, I was wondering if this has been your experience as well? If so, in your opinion, why?

David: They are not as popular as books by modern teachers such as Osho, nor do they have the appeal of the kind of self-help or new-age titles that seem to fill the 'spirituality' shelves in most bookstores. However, they do have steady, enduring sales. The standard texts that record Sri Ramana's dialogues tend to sell almost a thousand copies a year, every year, year after year. That means that a book such as *Talks with Ramana Maharshi*, which was first published in the mid-1950s, has probably sold well over 40,000 copies by now, and it continues to sell. I should mention that this is a 650-page hardback, and it's not an easy read unless you have a good knowledge of Sanskrit spiritual terms. New people discover Sri Ramana and his teachings every year, and every year the basic titles keep on selling.

[Sri Ramanasramam](#), the publisher of most of the books on Sri Ramana, takes a rather passive approach to distribution. Its publishing and sales department fulfils orders that come in, but they don't advertise, and they don't lobby bookstores or distributors to take their books. That may be one reason why books on Sri Ramana don't often appear on bookstore shelves. I wouldn't be surprised to learn that most bookstore managers, even in India, don't know that good books on Ramana Maharshi exist.

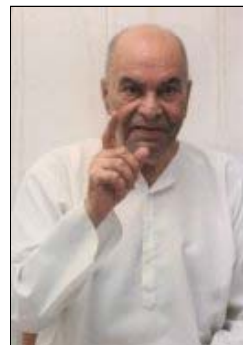
Having said that, I will also concede that books that attempt to codify or explain his teachings will never be very popular. I think they will always be restricted to a small market of discriminating people who have a hunger for spiritual liberation. In any generation that group will not be very large. Sri Ramana's teachings are not a 'feel-good' philosophy, nor do they offer quick fixes or instant experiences. They, instead, offer a tried and tested roadmap to those who want to pursue spiritual practice seriously. That kind of traditional approach is not so popular nowadays. People want instant results, not a prescription for hard work.

About twenty years ago I attended a talk in which an enthusiastic speaker said that he wanted to bring Sri Ramana's teachings to millions of people all over the world. The next man who stood up commented on this proposal by saying: 'I think this idea is misguided. The more accurately you explain Ramana Maharshi's teachings, the fewer people you will find are interested

in them. If you succeed in finding millions of new devotees for Sri Ramana, that will only be a measure of the extent to which you have diluted his teachings.'

I think that I agree with this. Ramana Maharshi was an exemplary saint who transformed the lives of countless people. Books about the transforming effect he had on people who came to see him will probably always find a good market, but if you publish a book about his teachings, few people will be interested in buying it, and even fewer in putting into practice the teachings that it contains.

Maalok: On a related note, I noticed that, recently, you are publishing books independently with no affiliation to an ashram or organization. What led to this change? In my opinion your recent trilogy entitled *The Power of The Presence* is very inspiring. Despite their obvious intrinsic merit, has it been difficult to distribute and sell these books by yourself?



Papaji

David: Most of the books I wrote or edited in the 1980s and early 90s were sponsored by various ashrams or spiritual organizations. I did these books as *seva*, as service to the teacher, and I gave all the royalties and rights away. In the middle of the 1990s Papaji, a direct disciple of Sri Ramana, encouraged me to start taking royalties from books as a means of supporting myself. Up until then the organizations I had been working for had generally supported me while I worked for them. Papaji had been a householder all his life, and he had supported his family through his earnings until he retired in his mid-50s. He liked people to be self-sufficient, and he encouraged people to support themselves. For the last few years I have been supporting myself by writing and publishing, and I am no longer sponsored or supported by any organization.

I like publishing my own stuff because I can choose any topic that appeals to me; I can write as much or as little as I like, and I have no deadlines. Having said that, though, I must add that I only publish material on Ramana Maharshi, his teachings, his disciples, and his Guru, Arunachala. I have no interest in branching out into other fields.

Selling and distribution can occasionally be a bit of a headache, particularly since potential customers are spread thinly all over the world. Having been in the spiritual book business for almost twenty years, I think I would be right in saying that it is much harder to distribute a good spiritual book nowadays than it was in the late eighties and early nineties. Spiritual bookstores are chronically short of money to pay their bills, and mainstream bookstores are primarily interested in bestsellers. Amazon, along with Barnes and Noble, are putting a lot of good outlets out of business.

My advertising budget is zero. I don't do book tours. I don't sit in shops and sign books. I don't go from city to city doing radio interviews. These are the standard promotional tools in the West. Many publishers nowadays won't even consider giving an author a contract unless she is willing to go on the road and promote the book for them. I have brought out three new books in the last eighteen months, and during that period there hasn't been a single night when I haven't slept in my own bed in Tiruvannamalai. I

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have a good mailing list of people who I know are interested in my books. Whenever I have something new to offer, I notify everyone by email. Other people hear about my books from friends or from notifications on the Web. Nowadays, there are so many specialized web sites, if a new book comes out on Sri Ramana, news of it will appear on sites specializing in *advaita*, gurus, enlightenment or Ramana Maharshi within a matter of days.

Hardly anyone comes across my books in bookstores nowadays because so few bookstores stock them. That doesn't bother me at all. There are several thousand people in the world who appreciate Ramana Maharshi enough to buy a new book about him or his teachings. Sooner or later my books will come to the attention of these people and they will buy them. I don't work very hard to find customers. I have a feeling that if someone is ready to appreciate a book on Sri Ramana, that book will somehow drop into his or her lap at the right time. I don't think it's my responsibility to try to foist my books on reluctant customers. When I was ready for Sri Ramana's words, the book was there, waiting for me. The same thing will happen when other people need to read about him or his teachings.

Last year a man I have never met volunteered to make a web page for me that would contain details of where to buy my books. 'OK', I said. 'Thank you.' He bought my domain name, made a simple site for me and paid the fees for two years. This year someone else I barely know offered to put in a lot of time upgrading it and adding lots of new material. 'OK,' I said again. 'Thank you.' People turn up when they are needed and the work gets done.

If any businessmen or women are reading this, they are probably scratching their heads in disbelief. However, it works. My books eventually find their customers, and from the feedback I get, the customers are generally happy with what they buy and read.

Maalok: Among the dozen or so books you have written and edited, are there any one or two that standout as being special for you personally?

David: Not really, I enjoyed working on them all. However, I think I got the most pleasure and happiness out of the biographies because they involved a lot of personal contact with all the subjects. Also, I enjoyed the research aspect of these books: tracking down little-known facts and incidents is something I always enjoy doing. Finally, once the research is over, there is the creative challenge of putting it all together into a seamless whole, constructing a narrative that enables the reader to enter into and be immersed in an astonishingly different world. I try to be as factual as possible when I do this, but at the same time I want to convey the reverence, the awe and the esteem I feel for these people. I write about these people because for me they are magnificent examples of how human lives should be lived.

Maalok: How did you gather the material for the biographies you have written? Did you use tape recorders etc. while conversing with the subjects? The reason I am asking is that

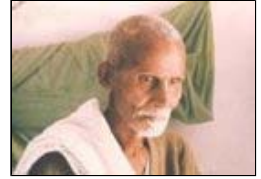
on reading I am impressed by the degree of details in each one of them, which becomes especially astounding since several of them were written in the twilight years of the subjects.

David: I don't think I had a tape recorder when I interviewed Saradamma and Lakshmana Swamy. I suppose I ought to remember something like that, but I can't. I think I just took notes as they talked. I remember sitting with them every morning for about an hour, probably over a period of about a month. There was a lot of detail in that book simply because Saradamma had such a good memory. She had an astonishing recall. Lakshmana Swamy didn't have such a good memory about the years that Saradamma was doing her *sadhana*, but her astounding photographic memory of that period more than made up for this. Lakshmana Swamy did, though, have excellent memories of his early life, his time with Sri Ramana and the years he spent as a solitary recluse. The two accounts complemented each other very well. There was no question of old age being a factor here because Lakshmana Swamy was still in his fifties then, and Saradamma was in her early twenties. She was describing events that had mostly happened five to eight years before.

With Annamalai Swami I had taped sessions every afternoon. I would fill most of a ninety-minute tape almost every day. I would transcribe it overnight, go back the next afternoon and use the same tape again for the next day's stories. I think it was an economy measure because I didn't have much money at the time, but looking back on it, I wish now that I had used separate tapes and kept them all. It would have been a nice record. I am sure there are now many people who would enjoy listening to him tell his stories. He was a good story-teller, and he had a captivating narrative style. He wasn't very good on dates or sequences of events - which story came before or after which other one - so I had to work all that out for myself later. That was an absorbing and fulfilling challenge: recreating his world, and populating it with all the characters and incidents he had told me about. I did a lot of Sherlock Holmes work, poring over old photos of ashram buildings, and going through old ashram account books, trying to match the stories he was telling me with the physical evidence of the buildings he was working on.

What I particularly liked about him was the way he would distinguish between stories that he had first-hand knowledge of and those that he didn't. If he had been present at some incident, he would tell me. If he had heard a story second-hand, he would qualify his account by saying that he only had indirect knowledge. He wasn't a scholarly man, but he understood the necessity of good scholarship. We were writing about his Guru, and to him the words and actions of his Guru were sacred. He wanted utmost accuracy wherever possible. Sometimes he would even give me what politicians would call 'off-the-record briefings'. He would give me opinions on why he thought certain people behaved the way they did, but then he would add, 'Don't print this because this is just my opinion. I am just telling you this to give you some background information on what the ashram was like at this time.' It was a pleasure to deal with someone who knew how to evaluate source material in this way.

When you talk to eighty-year-olds about their youth, there is



Annamalai Swami

always the possibility that they are misremembering things, but just about everything that was checkable from other sources turned out to be true. That gave me the confidence to believe in the reliability and accuracy of his whole narrative.

As I said, dates were not his strong point. Initially, for example, he was quite insistent that he came to Sri Ramana in 1930, but when I proved to him that Seshadri Swami died in early 1929, he had to change his mind because he had met Seshadri Swami on a few occasions. However, mistakes such as these were few and far between.

Papaji was also in his eighties when I collected the details of his life. He wrote out about 200 pages of answers for me in response to a massive biographical questionnaire I inflicted on him. It was sixteen pages long. All his satsangs were being recorded in those days, and during the hour or so he spent with visitors every day he often mentioned incidents from his early life. So, although I wasn't recording his stories directly, I had access to a whole archive of tapes that had records of him telling stories about various things that had happened to him over the years.

I contacted many people who had known him and moved with him at various periods of his life. Their information corroborated a lot of what he had been telling me. For example, when he was a child he said that Krishna would come and play with him in his bedroom, but apparently no one else in the family could see him. I spoke to two of his surviving sisters and they both remembered incidents in which a very young Papaji seemed to be playing with an unseen friend on his bed or in the family home. On one of these occasions he went into trance that lasted for hours.

Usually, when he told a story in response to a question, I got the feeling that he was often getting his information from his memory of the last time he told the story, rather than from the original incident itself. I think a lot of people do this. However, sometimes, he would spontaneously remember some incident and start talking about it. When this happened, the most astonishing details would come out. I remember him talking about a Muslim pir he met in Madras. I had heard the story before, but when he started telling me on this occasion I could feel that he was actually back in Madras in the mid-1940s, walking down the street and describing all the things he was seeing. He was talking about walking past particular shops and businesses and describing the sights and scenes as if he were actually walking down that particular street. These stories were very precious for me. It was like having a video replay of the incident, unobstructed by any of the subsequent retellings. I learned not to interrupt when he got into this kind of mood. If you asked a question, perhaps a clarification or an explanation, the look in his eyes would change and he would not be in the street any more. He would be back in his memory, telling the story in the way he usually did.

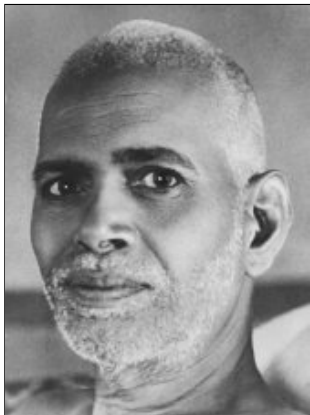
Overall, with all the people I have written about, I satisfied myself that I was dealing with reliable memories. With Papaji and Annamalai Swami, there were occasional discrepancies that no amount of research or questioning could sort out. The events they pertained to were simply too long ago. However, I am satisfied that, to the best of my ability, I have given reliable accounts of truly great people.

Next: [I don't think I need to burnish Sri Ramana's image at all because the uncensored truth of his life speaks for itself.](#)

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Sri Ramana Maharshi

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In this page:

[Would it be correct to surmise that, in your opinion, an enlightened Guru can never be held accountable for his or her actions?](#)

[Have you ever left out stories about the people you have written about because you felt that they would give a bad impression of their subjects?](#)

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Maalok: You mentioned that Papaji's surviving sisters saw him playing with Krishna when he was young, but no one saw actually Krishna except for Papaji himself. A sceptic could say that Papaji may well have been making all this up and just telling people that he had seen Krishna. Later, when he became famous, the family would probably say, 'Yes, yes, we saw him playing with Krishna when he was young'. Did you consider possibilities such as these?



Papaji

David: Yes, this is a valid point, and I probably picked a bad example when I mentioned this particular story. Of course, no one can corroborate visionary experiences because they are almost always restricted to one person. Papaji had visions on a regular basis throughout his life, and virtually no one else ever saw them. Many of his devotees had visions of their own when they were in Papaji's presence, and these too were only seen by one person. Even Papaji did not see them.

Leela, one of the sisters who said she had seen Papaji playing with Krishna as a boy, had a vision of Sita in Valmiki Ashram on the banks of the Ganga. Papaji was present on that occasion, and both of them saw the deity take a physical form and speak to them. Leela became somewhat hysterical and passed out. It definitely was not a normal experience for her. So, when she said that she had seen Papaji playing with Krishna when he was young, she had every reason to believe that he was telling the truth.

Many of the other stories that Papaji narrated were much easier to corroborate. Papaji had a huge fund of improbable stories and events. Some of them were so ridiculous, they left you thinking, 'This can't possibly be true. He's playing a joke on us and making all this up.' However, whenever I found people who had been present when the incident had taken place, they would always back up Papaji's version of events, or at least tell a story that was very, very similar to it.

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Maalok: You have mentioned that final Self-realization is when the mind actually 'dies' irreversibly in the Self. You have also mentioned how Papaji used to sometimes give an account of his life based on memory of his earlier narration. The idea of memories and a dead mind seem contradictory. Could you please clarify this?

David: Many people are puzzled by this apparent conundrum. A dead mind is one in which there is no thinker of thoughts, no perceiver of perceptions, no rememberer of memories. The thoughts, the perceptions and the memories can still be there, but there is no one who believes, 'I am remembering this incident,' and so on. These thoughts and memories can exist quite happily in the Self, but what is completely absent is the idea that there is a person who experiences or owns them.

Papaji once gave a nice analogy: 'You are sitting by the side of the road and cars are speeding past you in both directions. These are like the thoughts, memories and desires in your head. They are nothing to do with you, but you insist on attaching yourself to them. You grab the bumper of a passing car and get dragged along by it until you are forced to let go. This in itself is a stupid thing to do, but you don't even learn from your mistake. You then proceed to grab hold of the bumper of the next car that comes your way. This is how you all live your lives: attaching yourself to things that are none of your business and suffering unnecessarily as a result. Don't attach yourself to a single thought, perception or idea and you will be happy.'

In a dead mind the 'traffic' of mental activity may still be there, usually at a more subdued level, but there is no one who can grab hold of the bumper of an idea or a perception. This is the difference between a quiet mind and no mind at all. When the mind is still and quiet, the person who might attach himself or herself to the bumper of a new idea is still there, but when there is no mind at all, when the mind is dead, the idea that there is a person who might identify with an object of thought has been permanently eradicated. That is why it is called 'dead mind' or 'destroyed mind' in the Ramana literature. It is a state in which the possibility of identification with thoughts or ideas has definitively ended.

Let me go back to Papaji and what I said about his memories. Papaji said in an interview he gave in 1990 to two American dentists, 'When I speak, I never consult my memory or my past experience'. When I asked him about this, he said that people with minds always go back to the past in order to formulate their next sentence, whereas the words of enlightened people are prompted by the Self in the present moment, and are not the consequence of past memories or experiences. This is the difference between using your mind to have a conversation and allowing the Self to put the necessary words into your mouth whenever it is necessary to speak. When there is no mind, words come out spontaneously, as and when they are required. If those words happen to take the form of a story from the past, one should not come to the conclusion that there is an 'I' who is delving into past memories and retrieving them. When we see an enlightened person do this, we assume that this - a mind retrieving information from the

memory - is what is happening because this is the way our own minds work. We project the mechanism of our own minds onto the enlightened person and assume that she too must think and function in this way. We do this because we can't conceive of any other way that thoughts and memories can be articulated. Just for fun, I once asked Papaji how he managed to do his shopping without using his memory or his past experiences. I should mention here that he was a ferocious bargain hunter when it came to buying vegetables. He always insisted on the best quality at the cheapest price.

'How can you do this,' I asked, 'without a memory? To know whether you are getting a bargain, you have to know what the price was yesterday or last week, and to know whether or not a carrot is in a good condition, you need to need to have a memory and a prior experience of what a good carrot looks like.'

At first he just said, 'What a stupid question!' but then he laughed and more or less summarized what I have just explained: that there is no one who thinks, decides and chooses while he is out shopping. The Self does all these things automatically, but to an onlooker it appears as if there is someone inside the body making decisions based on past experience and knowledge.

I heard U. G. Krishnamurti talk about his shopping habits in very similar terms in the late 1970s.

He said, 'I push my trolley down the aisle and watch an arm reach out, pick up a can and put it in the cart. It's nothing to do with me. I didn't tell the arm to move in that direction and select that particular can. It just happened by itself. When I reach the checkout counter, I have a basketful of food, none of which I have personally selected.'

Maalok: You obviously have a reverence for the people you were writing about. Didn't that make it difficult to be objective about facts? For example, if you saw something 'not so nice' (at least as perceived by an average reader) about these people or their lives, there could have been a tendency to not include it in the books, given that you have a reverence towards them.

David: Let me start with Ramana Maharshi. I have been researching his life and teachings for a large part of the last twenty-five years and in all that time I have not come across a single incident that I would keep out of the public domain because it might give people a bad idea of him. His behaviour and demeanour at all times were impeccable. All the attributes we associate with saintliness were present in him: kindness, gentleness, humility, equanimity, tolerance, and so on. For decades he lived his life fully in the public spotlight. He had no private room of his own, so everything he did and said was open to scrutiny. Except when he went to the bathroom, he was never behind a closed door. Up until the 1940s, if you wanted to come and see him at 2 a.m. in the morning, you could walk into the hall where he lived and sit with him. Some people did occasionally invent stories about him to try to discredit him, but no one who had moved with him closely would ever believe them. There was simply no scope for scandal or misbehaviour because his life was so public, and so saintly. He never dealt with money, never spoke

badly of anyone, he owned nothing except his walking stick and his water pot, and he was never alone with a woman. Only people who had never watched him live his life could invent scandalous stories about him and expect other people to believe them.

When outsiders did make up stories about him, Sri Ramana would react with amusement rather than annoyance. When a disgruntled ex-devotee brought out an extremely libellous pamphlet about him in the early 1930s, the ashram manager wanted to go to court and sue the author to protect the good name of Sri Ramana and the ashram.

Sri Ramana dissuaded him and said, 'Why don't you instead sell it at the front gate? The good devotees will read it and not believe a word of it. The bad devotees will believe it and stay away. That way we will get fewer visitors here.'

The manager, of course, could never agree to such a proposal since the devotees would not stand for such a scurrilous booklet being sold on the ashram's premises. However, the whole incident illustrates an interesting aspect of Sri Ramana's character: not only was he unmoved by personal criticism, he occasionally enjoyed it, and at times even seemed to revel in it. It is said in the *sastras* that response to praise or blame is one of the last things to go before enlightenment happens. It was definitely absent in Sri Ramana. Let me mention one other story that very few people have heard about. There used to be a scrapbook in the hall where Sri Ramana lived. If there were any stories about him in the newspapers, someone would cut them out and paste them in the book. They were either neutral reports that gave information about his life, teachings and ashram, or they were very favourable testimonials. One day a highly critical report appeared in a newspaper. Sri Ramana himself cut it out and pasted it on the front cover of the scrapbook, overruling the horrified objections of all the devotees.

'Everyone should have their say,' he said. 'Why should we keep only the good reports? Why should we suppress the bad ones?'

This is all a roundabout way of saying that there are no bad stories about Sri Ramana, so the question of suppressing them doesn't arise.

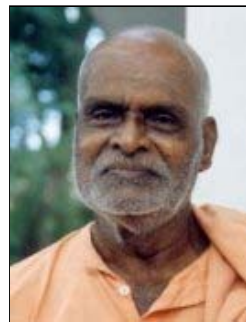
A few years ago I was sitting in on a conversation between Kunju Swami, someone who had been with Sri Ramana since the early 1920s, and a friend of mine, Michael James. Kunju Swami was revising one of his books, deleting a few stories that he thought might give a bad impression of Sri Ramana. To me the deletions were pointless. For example, when Sadhu Natanananda first came to Sri Ramana in 1918, he asked someone in the temple in town for directions.

The man he spoke to said, 'Don't waste your time going to see that man. I have been visiting him for sixteen years. He is completely indifferent to everyone.'

Kunju Swami wanted to delete this reply because he didn't want people to feel that someone could spend sixteen years visiting Bhagavan and not feel some benefit. For me, this is a reflection on this particular visitor's spiritual immaturity, not a criticism of Sri Ramana's transforming power. The story reflects badly on the person who was unable to recognise Sri Ramana's greatness, not on Sri Ramana himself. It may rain twenty-four hours a day, but nothing will grow in sterile soil.



Sadhu Natanananda



Kunju Swami

Anyway, Michael asked Kunju Swami, 'In the thirty years that you were associated with Sri Ramana [1920-50] did you ever see him do or say anything that was so bad or so embarrassing that you feel that you couldn't tell anyone, or make it public, because it would reflect badly on his public image?'

Kunju Swami thought for a while and said 'No'.

'Then who are we protecting by censoring stories?' asked Michael.

He didn't receive an answer.

Kunju Swami felt that that it was an expression of his Guru *bhakti* to filter out any stories that might, even remotely, cause readers to think that Sri Ramana was not some great omnipotent being who transformed everyone who came to him. I take a different view. I don't think I need to burnish Sri Ramana's image at all because the uncensored truth of his life speaks for itself.

Having said all this, I should also make it clear that Sri Ramana himself readily admitted that enlightenment didn't turn people into paragons of virtue. Like most great Masters before him, he said that it was impossible to judge whether someone was enlightened by what he or she did or said. Saintliness does not necessarily go hand in hand with enlightenment, although most people like to think that it should. Sri Ramana was a rare conjunction of saintliness and enlightenment, but many other Masters and enlightened beings were not. They were not less enlightened because they didn't conform to the social and ethical mores of their times, they simply had different destinies to fulfil.

In *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, Sri Ramana narrates the story of Kaduveli Siddhar, an austere ascetic who attracted public ridicule by having an affair with a temple dancer. A local king offered a reward to anyone who could prove whether this man really was a saint or not. At the time the challenge was issued, Kaduveli Siddhar was subsisting on dry leaves that fell from trees. When the dancer eventually gave birth to Kaduveli Siddhar's baby, she thought that she had proved her point and went to the king to collect her reward.

The king, who wanted some public confirmation of their intimate relationship, arranged a dance performance. When it was under way, the dancer stretched out her foot towards Kaduveli Siddhar because one of her anklets had become loose. When he retied it for her, the audience jeered at him. Kaduveli Siddhar was unmoved. He sang a Tamil verse, part of which said, 'If it is true that I sleep day and night quite aware of the Self, may this stone burst into two and become the wide expanse'.

Immediately, a nearby stone idol split apart with a resounding crack, much to the astonishment of the audience.

Sri Ramana's conclusion to this story was, 'He proved himself to be an unswerving *jnani*. One should not be deceived by the external appearance of a *jnani*.'

I find it fascinating that Sri Ramana, a man of impeccable saintliness, could say that behaviour such as this could not be taken to indicate that Kaduveli Siddhar was unenlightened.

Maalok: That seems to take care of Ramana Maharshi. What about the other people you have written about?

David: Well, the story of Kaduveli Siddhar reminds me of Papaji,

who took a second wife, a Belgian woman called Meera, while his first wife was still alive, and even fathered a daughter, Mukti, with her. He was over sixty at the time, and Meera was not much more than twenty. This relationship upset many of Papaji's devotees, and a significant number of them abandoned him because they all thought that he had fallen from his high state. Papaji himself did not conceal this relationship. As soon as the baby was born, he brought both Meera and Mukti to his parents' home in Lucknow to introduce Mukti to her grandparents. When I was researching his biography, I told him that it was his decision whether or not this story went into the book. In response, he sat down and wrote out an account of the relationship for me. He didn't think that it was anything that he needed to conceal. Though many people might think badly of him because of this relationship, there was never any question of suppressing it, of leaving it out of the book.

Maalok: Did he ever explain why he started this relationship? Did he give any reasons?

David: Papaji, and enlightened people in general, never have any reasons for the actions they undertake. Since they don't have minds that choose and decide, they don't generate reasons for future courses of action.

I remember when there was a plan to go on an extensive foreign tour. Tickets had been booked, visas had been obtained. When the travel agents arrived with the tickets, he simply said, 'I'm not going anywhere,' and the trip was cancelled. A few weeks later, when someone asked him the reason for the sudden last-minute cancellation, he said, 'Reasons? I don't have reasons for anything I do.'

When you abide as the Self, you do whatever the Self prompts you to do, without thinking or knowing why. There is nobody there who can say, 'I should do this; I should not do that,' because there is no one left who can make these decisions.

I once met someone who lived with him in Hardwar. They used to go for walks along the Ganga every day, often taking the same route. Sometimes Papaji would start off along one route and then, for no apparent reason, he would veer right or left and head off somewhere else. The following dialogue once ensued:

'Where are we going?'

'I don't know.'

'Why did you turn off the path?'

'I don't know. Something just impelled me to walk in this direction.'

'How far do we have to go?'

'I don't know. I will know when we get there.'

'Where's "there"?''

'I don't know. When we get there I will know why I started walking this way.'

Eventually, they met a man in the forest, and that man had a waking-up experience with Papaji. The Self knew that this man was ready for such an experience and it directed Papaji towards him. Papaji didn't know that he had been diverted towards this meeting until he met the man. He simply accepted that the Self had propelled him in a particular direction. He didn't question or

doubt the diversion. In fact, he didn't think or worry about it in any way. He just let the Self take him to where he was needed.

I think we can say that Papaji had a destined meeting with this man. I think I would also say that Papaji had a destiny with Meera, some karma to work out with her. Because the business involved sex and a baby rather than a meeting in a forest that resulted in a waking-up experience, many people would say that he behaved immorally, but I would just say that his body fulfilled its ordained destiny.

Maalok: On reading your above explanation a vast majority of people, especially sceptics would say, 'That's an extraordinarily lenient view to take of a man who was fathering a baby outside marriage with a woman forty years his junior'.

David: In [*Sri Ramana Darsanam*](#), a book I recently edited for [*Sri Ramanasramam*](#), the author, Sadhu Natanananda, attributes the following remarks to Sri Ramakrishna, the great 19th century Bengali saint: 'Even if my Guru is one who frequents the toddy shop, I will not superimpose any blemish on him. Why? Because I know that he is not going to lose his Guru-nature simply because of that. I have taken refuge in him not for examining and investigating his external life. That also is not my duty. Therefore, whatever happens, he alone is my Guru.'

The word Guru means 'the one who dispels darkness'. Someone who has 'Guru-nature' has the ability to wake people up from the darkness of their self-inflicted ignorance and show them the light of the Self. Papaji had that Guru-nature. In the four years that I was writing and researching his biography I came across innumerable people from all over the world who testified that, in an encounter with him, they had had a direct experience of the Self. The experiences often didn't stay, but the fact that they happened at all indicates to me that Papaji had that Guru-nature, that rare ability to show people the Self. He could be cranky and irascible at times, but no one who moved with him for any length of time could doubt that a massive, transforming energy was radiating from him.

Maalok: So would it be correct to surmise that, in your opinion, an enlightened Guru can never be held accountable for his or her actions? That we never have the right to complain about or criticize his or her behaviour simply because it does not conform to accepted canons of morality?

David: For me, the true Guru is God manifesting in a human form. There is nobody inside the Guru's body who chooses or decides to take actions, and no one there to take responsibility for them. What they say is the word of God, and what they do are the actions of God. People who want to judge them by their words and actions are just seeing a body and are assuming that there is a mind inside it that thinks and decides in much the same way that they do. They can't see the divinity behind the form, and they can't feel or experience it in the radiations that come of that form.

When Saradamma was doing her *sadhana* at Lakshmana Swamy's ashram in the 1970s, he occasionally treated her very



Annamalai Swami

harshly and put her through many tests.

Years later, after her own realisation, Saradamma told me, 'You shouldn't think that Swamy was sitting in his house, plotting and scheming: "I will test Sarada in this way and see how she reacts." The *jnani* has no mind to think, plan and decide like this. I was tested by the Self because I needed to be tested. Nobody planned these tests, although it looks as if Swamy did.'

When Annamalai Swami came to Ramanashram in the late 1920s, Sri Ramana made him work very hard for many years. Whenever he saw Annamalai Swami sitting down, doing nothing, he would invent some job for him to keep him busy. He set up situations in which Annamalai Swami would be brought into fierce conflict on a regular basis with the ashram manager. This went on for about twelve years, at the end of which Sri Ramana told him, 'Your karma is finished,' and repeated the phrase twice. From then on, Annamalai Swami was allowed to meditate in peace by himself. Who can judge something like this? The Self, acting through Sri Ramana, made Annamalai Swami toil hard for years in a confrontational situation, while other people there had a much easier life.

Sometimes the Guru has to be harsh because other methods don't work. Nisargadatta Maharaj once said, 'You are all holding onto the banks of a river, while I am trying to launch you out into the middle where you can float with the flow. I tell you to let go, but you don't do it, or you ask for a method to accomplish the letting go. I ask you nicely to let go, but you don't listen. In the end I give up and just stamp on your fingers.'

How can you judge apparently harsh behaviour when its goal is the liberation of devotees? What looks like bad behaviour to an ignorant onlooker might in fact be just what a particular devotee needs.

Papaji appeared to treat Meera and Mukti very harshly in the 1980s and early 90s. They both suffered a lot at his hands, but when I spoke to them in early 1998, just after Papaji passed away, they both conceded that the treatment had been very effective from a spiritual point of view.

Experience has taught me that Gurus rarely behave in what ordinary people would regard as a socially acceptable way. I take the position that their apparently erratic behaviour is necessary to crush devotees' egos. I don't judge them. I accept that are doing what the situation demands, without planning, choosing or deciding.

Maalok: We have digressed a little from the original question. Have you ever left out stories about the people you have written about because you felt that they would give a bad impression of their subjects?

David: The main censors were the subjects themselves, but in all cases the censored stories were about other people, not about themselves. Even Sri Ramana did this. When *Self-Realization* was first published in 1931, there was an extensive chapter about the period when Sri Ramana was living on the hill. During that period many jealous *sadhus* campaigned against him, trying to drive him away. From their point of view, Sri Ramana was stealing their business because he was attracting too many devotees. One *sadhu*

tried to kill him by rolling rocks down a hill onto him. Someone else tried to poison him. When the book was first published, Sri Ramana asked that many of these stories be left out of the next edition because most of these people were still alive. He thought that they would be upset when they found out that an account of their harassment had been published. Later on, in the 1940s, when they had all passed away, he said that the stories could be put back in because there was no one left alive who could be offended.

When I wrote Lakshmana Swamy's biography he also deleted a few stories for the same reason.

'That particular person is still alive,' he told me. 'She and her husband may be upset if they find that this particular story has been published.'

In that particular book I let Lakshmana Swamy and Saradamma decide which stories they wanted to be included or excluded. None of the ones that were excluded would have reflected badly on them. On the contrary, I think that many of them would have enhanced their reputation. Some quite miraculous events were excluded, much to my regret, but don't ask me what they are because I am abiding by their decision not to make them public.

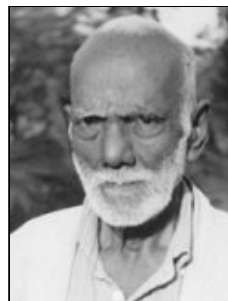
Annamalai Swami also asked me to omit a few stories that didn't show some of Sri Ramana's devotees in a favourable light. Some of them were still alive, and a few were personally well known to me, so I recognised the validity of his request.

Let me tell you one story, just to give you some idea of the sort of thing that we are dealing with here. In the 1920s, quite a few of the *sadhus* who congregated around Sri Ramana were regular users of *ganja*. Sri Ramana discouraged them from this habit, but they didn't listen to him. They used to congregate in a small Draupadi shrine about 300 yards from the ashram. These people would come to Sri Ramana and say, 'We are going for Draupadi *darshan*,' which everyone knew was the code for 'We're going off for a smoke'.

Ramaswami Pillai was one of this *ganja*-taking group. When he returned from the Draupadi Temple, he would be in a garrulous mood, and would often interrupt the question-and-answer sessions that were going on in the hall. Someone would ask Sri Ramana a question, and Ramaswami Pillai would then launch into a long, stoned *advaita* ramble, which he thought was the perfect answer to the question. Eventually, to circumvent these interruptions, a rule was passed that no one could interrupt a dialogue between a visitor and Sri Ramana unless they were invited to do so by either of the two parties to the conversation.

One day, a man came to the hall and began to question Sri Ramana in a very argumentative way. Sri Ramana was at first patient with him, but after a few minutes he turned to his attendant and said, 'This man hasn't come here to learn anything. He has only come to fight and quarrel. Go and fetch Ramaswami Pillai. He can fight and quarrel with him.'

I thought this was a very funny story, a good slice of ashram life from the 1920s, but I could also recognise the validity of not publishing it. Ramaswami Pillai was still alive at the time. In fact, he was a good friend of mine, and I often visited him. The next time I saw him, I asked him if it was true. He laughed and agreed



Ramaswami Pillai



Seshadri Swami

(Click on image to
enlarge)

that it was. He also confessed that once, when he was very stoned, he went on the rampage with a machete and chopped down all the ashram's banana trees. Though he wasn't at all embarrassed by these memories, I decided not to pass them on while he was still alive. I am telling you now because, following Sri Ramana's policy, there is no one left alive who can be embarrassed or hurt by them.

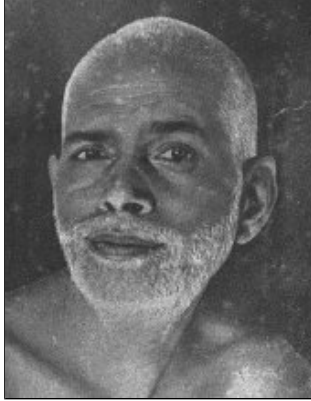
Interestingly, it was Seshadri Swami rather than Sri Ramana who cured him of the *ganja* habit. Seshadri Swami just looked at him and told him off for smoking *ganja*. From that moment on, Ramaswami Pillai never again felt the urge to smoke.

There are many stories such as these that I chose for various reasons not to include in any of my books. None of them was excluded because they might reflect badly on the subjects of the book.

Next: [I worship manifestations of God on earth with the words that I string together](#)

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Living the Inspiration of Sri Ramana Maharshi
A dialogue between David Godman and Maalok, an Indian
academic now teaching in America
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Sri Ramana Maharshi

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In this page:

[Do you ever feel that your reverence for your subjects prevents you from recording their stories in an objective way?](#)

[Could you give some incidents from your life that illustrate the feeling of surrender to destiny?](#)

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Maalok: Were there any other constraints that made you decide what to put into and what to leave out of your books?

David: When I wrote [Nothing Ever Happened](#) I included many accounts that had been written by devotees themselves. I also interviewed many people who had known Papaji, and I included many of these interviews in the book. Whenever I did this, I would always show the author or the interviewee my final draft. If they wanted to make changes, they were quite free to do so. I wanted all the contributors to be satisfied that I had given a fair and accurate presentation of their views and their stories. The encounter between a Guru and a disciple is for many people a sacred one, and I didn't want to be guilty of misrepresenting or misrecording them through ignorance or inadvertence.

When [Living by the Words of Bhagavan](#) came out, some people from [Ramanasramam](#) came to Annamalai Swami and asked him to change or delete some of the stories in subsequent editions. He had no problem with omitting stories about other people, but he adamantly refused to change any of the accounts of the exchanges that took place between himself and Sri Ramana.

He said, 'The words of my Guru are sacred. Everything he told me is sacred. Everything I saw him do is sacred to me. I have lived my life by following his words and his example. All these things are sacred to me, and no one has the right to change them. These are his gifts to me, and I accept them as his *prasad*. To change any of these things would be to refuse his *prasad* or to throw it away. I will never do that.'

I think all devotees think this way about the encounters they have had with their Guru, which is why I don't want to be guilty of misrepresenting any of these meetings.

Maalok: Going back to my original question, do you ever feel that your reverence for your subjects prevents you from recording their stories in an objective way?

David: When I wrote the biographies of Lakshmana Swamy, Saradamma, Annamalai Swami and Papaji, the subjects were still



Annamalai Swami

alive. I worked closely with all them on their stories and always gave them the final authority to include something or to leave it out. I had enormous respect and admiration for all of them. I saw myself as a vehicle for them to get their stories out, not as someone who was sitting in judgement on them. I used my writing skills to express the sense of awe I felt when I encountered the stories of their lives and accomplishments. They were not hagiographies since I did my utmost to research and corroborate all the facts I was given, but at the same time I want to make it clear that in some sense these books were an act of worship for me, an offering to God. When I had finished writing *Nothing Ever Happened* I put the following verse from Tukaram in my introduction:

Words are the only
Jewels I possess.
Words are the only
Clothes I wear.
Words are the only food
That sustains my life.
Words are the only wealth
I distribute among people.
Says Tuka [Tukaram],
'Witness the Word.
He is God.
I worship Him
With words'.

This is how I feel about my writings. I worship manifestations of God on earth with the words that I string together. I don't worship by inventing stories or by suppressing them. I use my intellect to assemble credible, authoritative and readable accounts that I hope will imbue readers with a desire for liberation and a respect for Ramana Maharshi and all the teachers and devotees in his lineage.

Maalok: There is a prevalent myth among many people who don't know much about Ramana Maharshi that he rarely spoke. When these people see volumes and volumes of books written that claim to be '*Talks with Ramana Maharshi*' they question the authenticity of these books. Were these talks real? How authentic are the sources?

David: Ramana Maharshi was silent for a lot of the time, but if you had a spiritual query to put to him, he would generally be happy to give you an answer, often quite a detailed one. I mentioned *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* a little earlier. Someone who picks this up might come to the conclusion that he was a talkative man because there are over 600 pages of dialogues there. But have a look at the dates. The book covers a four-year period in the late 1930s. If you average that out, it comes to about half a page a day. That's not a lot of talking for a man who sat in public for up to eighteen hours every day.

The question of how authentic all the books about Sri Ramana's life and teachings are is a complex one, and, given time constraints, I will refrain from going into it on a book-by-book basis. A number of books of dialogues were published during Sri Ramana's lifetime, and all of them were checked and edited by Sri Ramana himself. These include *Maharshi's Gospel*, *Spiritual Instructions*, and the

talks that precede *Sat Darshana Bhashya*. One must also put on this list the teachings Sri Ramana gave out that were recorded by Muruganar in Tamil verse. These have been brought out in a book entitled *Guru Vachaka Kovai*. Though all of these works have Sri Ramana's imprimatur, they only constitute a small fraction of the published dialogues.

No one ever recorded Sri Ramana speaking because he refused to let any recordings be made. For many years the ashram manager also forbade anyone from taking notes in Sri Ramana's presence. This meant that many of the dialogues were written down from memory several hours later. There are always going to be errors in a system like this, but I don't think that there are many serious ones. Sri Ramana's teachings have been expressed very clearly in his written works and in the few books of dialogues that he vetted during his lifetime. The remaining body of work, which was not checked, is fairly consistent with these approved teachings.

Maalok: In one of the books you wrote or edited I remember reading that Maharshi's answers to similar questions by different devotees were not necessarily the same because they were guided by the state of mind of the questioner, rather than the question itself. Could you comment on this, based on your own experience of watching enlightened people teach?

David: If you drop ten people at random in a big city and have them ask people in their neighborhood, 'How do I get to the city center?' each person will be given a different set of directions, and all the instructions will be correct. People who start from different places need different instructions to get to the same destination.

If you sit in the presence of an enlightened teacher and ask, 'What do I have to do to get enlightened?' that teacher can immediately see where you are spiritually, and what you need to do to make progress. The reply will be based on what he or she sees in your mind, not on some prescribed formula that is handed out to everyone. In some therapy groups there are tried-and-tested techniques that are given out to everyone - the twelve-step approach for recovering alcoholics is a good example - but you don't find that kind of approach with enlightened teachers.

That's one answer to your question. One can also say that enlightened people respond to the state of the mind of the person in front of them, not just to the question it asks. A person asking an apparently polite and respectful question may be hiding his true feelings. He may be trying to test the teacher; he may be trying to provoke him, and so on. Quite often, the teacher will respond to those inner feelings, rather than the question itself. Since only the teacher can really see what is going on in people's minds, replies and responses often appear to be random or arbitrary to other people who are watching or listening. Ramana Maharshi once quoted, with approval, a verse that said, in effect, 'The enlightened one laughs with those who joke, and cries with those who grieve, all the time being unaffected by the laughter and the grief'.

It is often the inner mood of a questioner that determines the emotional tone of an exchange with a teacher. There are records of Ramana Maharshi, who was normally quiet and unprovokable, jumping off his sofa and chasing people out of the room because he could see that they had come to him with a hidden agenda, perhaps

anger, or a desire to demonstrate the superiority of their own ideas. Other people couldn't see this aggression at all because it was well hidden.

I watched a woman approach Papaji a few years ago with what appeared to be a sensible, spiritual question. He exploded with anger, said that she was only interested in sex and told her to go away. We were all quite shocked because this was her first day, her first meeting. Later that day I spoke to the woman she had come with and asked her how her friend had dealt with this extreme reaction.

She laughed and said, 'I'm so glad Papaji reacted like that. Every year she comes to India and goes to a new ashram, pretending to be interested in the teacher and the teachings, but every year she starts an affair with some devotee. That's the real reason why she comes. After a few months she gets bored and leaves. I'm so happy that someone has finally seen through her game.'

I have witnessed countless strange reactions such as these in the teachers I have been with, all of them caused by hidden thoughts and desires that none of the rest of us could see.

There is something else that is going on when you sit in front of a true teacher. There is an effortless transmission of peace that stills the mind and brings an intense joy to the heart. None of this will be recorded in the dialogue that is going on between the two of you. It is something very private, and only the two of you are in on the secret. Words may be exchanged but the real communication is a silent one. In such cases the teacher is often reacting to the temporary absence of your mind, rather than the question you asked a few minutes before, but who else can see this?

Let me give you an example from my own experience. In the late 1970s I sat with a little-known teacher called Dr Poy, a Gujarati who lived in northern Bombay. On my first meeting I asked him what his teachings were and he replied, 'I have no teachings. People ask questions and I answer them. That is all.'

I persevered: 'If someone asks you "How do I get enlightened?", what do you normally tell them?'

'Whatever is appropriate,' he replied.

After a few more questions like this, I realized that I wasn't going to receive a coherent presentation of this man's teachings, assuming of course that he had any. He was a good example of what I have just been talking about. He didn't have a doctrine or a practice that he passed out to everyone who came to see him. He simply answered all questions on a case-by-case basis.

I sat quietly for about ten minutes while Dr Poy talked in Gujarati to a couple of other visitors. In those few minutes I experienced a silence that was so deep, so intense, it physically paralyzed me.

He turned to me and said, smiling, 'What's your next question?'

He knew I was incapable of replying. His question was a private joke between us that no one else there would have understood. I felt as if my whole body had been given a novocaine injection. I was so paralyzed, in an immobilized, ecstatic way, I couldn't even smile at his remark.

He looked at me and said, 'There is no such thing as right method, there is only right effort. Whatever technique you choose will work if you follow it intensely enough. You asked for my teachings and here they are: "Part-time *sadhus* don't get

enlightened."

On one level this was a statement that one had to work hard at one's *sadhana*, but at the same time the experience I was having there clearly indicated to me that it is the powerful presence of the teacher that effortlessly quietens the mind. So much is going on in a teacher-student encounter that is not picked up by other people who are watching it take place. Just about everyone I know who has been with a real teacher has had experiences like this, experiences that have little or nothing to do with the words that were going backwards and forwards.

Maalok: It is interesting that you bring up the idea of peace in the presence of a realized person. Sometimes, people talk about feeling very happy or bubbly in the presence of such people and not as much about peace. In your understanding, are happiness and peace equivalent?

David: Sri Ramana sometimes described the state of the Self as being peace, and sometimes he would say that it is happiness. I have used these terms frequently in talking to you because these are terms that most people can relate to. Most people claim that they have experienced peace or happiness at some point, but this is not what Sri Ramana is really alluding to when he says that the Self is peace or happiness. He is attempting to describe a state in which there is no experiencer at all. That state is impossible to convey in words, but the terms 'peace', 'stillness', 'silence' and 'happiness' were words that he often used to indicate the nature of the final state.

What you describe as 'bubbly' experiences, feelings of ecstasy or joy, are pleasant mental states. They are not the true awareness of what remains when mind itself has completely gone.

Maalok: Above all other traits, Maharshi used to emphasize humility the most. But humility is one of the hardest things to get. In fact if you try to be humble, often, it has the opposite effect. From your research and meetings with *jnanis* can you share with us some of their teachings that would help a seeker in this regard?

David: I agree with you that Maharshi prized humility. He himself had a natural, effortless humility, and he frequently stressed that humility was necessary for spiritual development. But how to practice it? This is a big problem because attempting to be humble is just the ego adopting a new behavior pattern. If it's done deliberately, it's not true humility.

Lakshmana Swamy, a direct disciple of Sri Ramana, also stresses humility, even occasionally saying that humility alone will be enough to attain realization of the Self. However, he defines humility as 'the mind humbling itself before the Self'. This, for me, is the true humility. To whatever extent your mind has surrendered to the Self within, to that extent you are humble. It is nothing to do with how you behave with other people. If the inner humility that comes from an attenuated mind is there, then true humility will manifest in outer behavior. Humility is egolessness, and egolessness is attained by making the mind subside into its source, the Self.

Let me give you an extract from a book, [*Sri Ramana Darsanam*](#), that I recently edited. This is Sri Ramana speaking about the necessity of humility:

The power of humility, which bestows immortality, is the foremost among powers that are hard to attain. Since the only benefit of learning and other similar virtues is the attainment of humility, humility alone is the real ornament of the sages. It is the storehouse of all other virtues and is therefore extolled as the wealth of divine grace. Although it is a characteristic befitting wise people in general, it is especially indispensable for *sadhus*.

Since attaining greatness is impossible for anyone except by humility, all the disciplines of conduct such as *yama* and *niyama*, which are prescribed specifically for aspirants on the spiritual path, have as their aim only the attainment of humility. Humility is indeed the hallmark of the destruction of the ego. Because of this, humility is especially extolled by *sadhus* themselves as the code of conduct befitting them.

Moreover, for those who are residing at Arunachala, it is indispensable in every way. Arunachala is the sacred place where even the embodiments of God, Brahma, Vishnu and Sakti, humbly subsided. Since it has the power to humble even those who would not be humbled, those who do not humbly subside at Arunachala will surely not attain that redeeming virtue anywhere else. The Supreme Lord, who is the highest of the high, shines unrivalled and unsurpassed only because he remains the humblest of the humble. When the divine virtue of humility is necessary even for the Supreme Lord, who is totally independent, is it necessary to emphasize that it is absolutely indispensable for *sadhus* who do not have such independence? Therefore, just as in their inner life, in their outer life also *sadhus* should possess complete and perfect humility. It is not that humility is necessary only for devotees of the Lord; even for the Lord it is the characteristic virtue.

In the final paragraph of this extract Sri Ramana mentions that God Himself derives His greatness from His humility. This is a point of view I have never found expressed by other teachers. We all imagine God as a being who has infinite power. Sri Ramana is on record as saying, perhaps somewhat whimsically, that God got His job because He was the most humble being in the universe, not because He was the most powerful. Here are two of his statements on this topic:

One's greatness increases to the extent that one becomes humble. The reason why God is supreme to such an extent that the whole universe bows to Him is His sublime state of humility in which the deluded ego never rises unknowingly.

Is it not on account of His behaving so humbly, as one ever in the service of every creature, that God stands worthy of all the glorious worships ever performed by all the worlds? By seeing Himself in all, by being humble even to devotees who bow to everyone, and by naturally

remaining at such a pinnacle of humility that nothing can be humbler than Himself, the state of being supreme has come to the Lord.

All this may sound very eccentric unless one understands that humility equates with egolessness, rather than with a kind of 'nice' or socially acceptable behaviour. God is God because he is utterly egoless, utterly humble, and not because He is omnipotent or omniscient.

Maalok: Ramana Maharshi himself never had a physical Guru - I mean no living person. Is it correct to say that he often encouraged people to be connected to the Guru within, the Self, instead of the physical Guru? On the other hand, his direct disciple, Sri Lakshmana Swamy (who realized the Self in presence of Ramana Maharshi) says that a *living* physical Guru is *necessary* for Self-Realization. Can you help clarify these apparently contradictory viewpoints? What is your best understanding on this issue?

David: Sri Ramana himself never had a human Guru, but he is on record as saying that the mountain of Arunachala was his Guru. In his devotional poetry he says that Arunachala was his Guru, his Self and his God. So, his Guru did have a physical form, even though it wasn't a human one.

Sri Ramana always taught that a Guru is necessary for everyone who wants to realize the Self. When he spoke on this topic, he would usually say that the Self takes the form of a physical Guru who instructs the devotee and supervises his progress. At the same time, the Guru is also the Self within. That inner Self, that inner Guru, pulls the mind into itself, and if the mind is mature enough, the inner Guru dissolves the mind completely. Both the inner and the outer Guru are required to complete the work.

You have cited Lakshmana Swamy as someone who says that a living human Guru is essential for devotees who want to realize the Self. He is on record as saying that in a few very rare cases the Self within can alone serve as the Guru and bring about enlightenment. He puts Ramana Maharshi in this category. The vast majority of people, he says, need a physical Guru. I don't think that this is too different from what Sri Ramana said on many occasions.

The Saiva religion of South India speaks of three categories of seekers. Those in the first and biggest category need a human Guru because they have a large amount of impurities or spiritual impediments. The second category comprises devotees who are much more pure. These people can realize the Self by having God appear to them in the form of a Guru to instruct and enlighten them. Many of the old Saiva saints, whose writings and stories now form part of the Saiva canon, fall into this category.

In the highest category there are those very rare souls who can realize the Self through the power of the Self within.

In my opinion, the number of people who can realize the Self without the aid of a living human Guru is very, very small.

Maalok: Surrender to God or the Guru is rare in today's times. But you have mentioned that in your life quite often you simply had to surrender. Could you give some incidents from your life that illustrate the feeling of surrender to destiny?

David: We all think that we are in charge of our lives, that we are responsible for our well-being and the well-being of our dependents. We might acknowledge at a theoretical level that God is in charge of the world, that God does everything, but that doesn't stop us planning and scheming and doing. Sometimes, we find something we can't control - a child may be dying of leukemia despite the best medical treatment - so we turn to God and ask for divine intervention. This is not surrender, it's just more doing. It's seeking an extra resource when all the traditional ones have failed.

Surrender is different. It's acknowledging that God runs the world every minute of every day, that He is not just an extra resource, a *deus ex machina*, that one turns to in times of need. Surrender is not asking that things be different; it is acceptance and gratitude for things being the way they are. It's not a grit-your-teeth stoicism either; it's the experience of joy in God's dispensation, whatever it might be.

About twenty years ago I read a Christian book entitled *Thank You God*. Its basic thesis was that one should continuously thank God for the way things are right now, not petition Him for things to be different. That means thanking Him for all the terrible things that are going on in your life, not just thanking Him for the good stuff that is coming your way. And this should not just be at the verbal level. One needs to keep saying 'Thank you, God,' to oneself until one actually feels a glow of gratitude. When this happens, there are remarkable and unexpected consequences. Let me give you an example

There was a woman featured in this book whose husband was an alcoholic. She had organized prayer meetings at her local church in which everyone had prayed to God, asking Him to stop this man from drinking. Nothing happened. Then this woman heard about 'Thank you, God'. She thought, 'Well, nothing else has worked. Let me try this.' She started saying, 'Thank you God for making my husband an alcoholic,' and she kept on saying it until she actually began to feel gratitude inside. Shortly afterwards, her husband stopped drinking of his own accord and never touched alcohol again.

This is surrender. It's not saying, 'Excuse me God, but I know better than You, so would You please make this happen,' it's acknowledging, 'The world is the way You want it to be, and I thank You for it'.

When this happens in your life, seemingly miraculous things start happening around you. The power of your own surrender, your own gratitude, actually changes the things around you. When I first read about this, I thought, 'This is weird, but it just might work. Let me try it.' At that point in my life, I had been having problems with four or five people whom I was trying to do business with. Despite daily reminders, they were not doing things they had promised to do. I sat down and started saying 'Thank you Mr X for not doing this job. Thank you Mr Y for trying to cheat me on that last deal we did,' and so on. I did this for a couple of hours until I finally did feel a strong sense of gratitude towards these people. When their image came up in my mind, I didn't remember all the frustrations I had experienced in dealing with them. I just had an image of them in my mind towards which I felt gratitude and acceptance.

The next morning, when I went to work, all of these people were

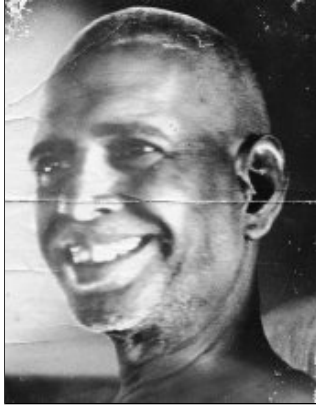
waiting for me. Usually, I had to go hunting for them in order to listen to their latest excuse. All of them were smiling, and all of them had done the jobs I had been pestering them for days to do. It was an astonishing testimonial to the power of loving acceptance. Like everyone else, I am still stuck in the world of doing-doing-doing, but when all my misguided doings have produced an intractable mess, I try to drop my belief that 'I' have to do something to solve this problem, and start thanking God for the mess I have made for myself. A few minutes of this is usually enough to resolve the thorniest of problems.

When I was sixteen, I took a gliding course. The first time I was given the controls, the glider was wobbling all over the place because I was reacting, or I should say over-reacting, to every minor fluctuation of the machine. Finally, the instructor took the controls away from me and said 'Watch this'. He put the glider on a level flight, put the controls in the central position and then let go of them. The glider flew itself, with no wobbles at all, with no one's hands on the controls. All my effects were just interfering with the glider's natural ability to fly itself. That's how life is for all of us. We persist in thinking that we have to 'do' things, but all our doings merely create problems.

I am not claiming that I have learned to take my hand off the controls of life and let God pilot my life for me, but I do remember all this, with wry amusement, when problems (all self-inflicted, of course) suddenly appear. A couple of weeks ago, for example, I found myself in the middle of a publishing drama that seemed to be utterly insoluble. It was such a mess, I didn't even try to talk to all the people involved. I went instead to Sri Ramana's *samadhi*, put the manuscript in front of it, and explained what had happened. I thanked him for the drama and added, 'This is your responsibility, not mine'. I had my eyes closed when I said this. When I opened them, an old friend was there, offering me some chocolate-chip cookies, something that had never happened before. I took them as Ramana's *prasad*. Later that day the problem was solved in five minutes. All the protagonists (who had been immovable antagonists the day before) came together and the work was completed amicably in record time.

Next: [Those with true vision come here and see and feel the radiation of Siva-jnana.](#)

Living the Inspiration of Sri Ramana Maharshi
A dialogue between David Godman and Maalok, an Indian
academic now teaching in America
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Sri Ramana Maharshi

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In this page:

[How did the mountain of Arunachala get to be such a powerful place?](#)

[About you - what exactly made you leave everything and come to Tiruvannamalai in your early youth?](#)

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Maalok: I think on hearing some of your above examples (all of which led to desirable final outcomes) we can perhaps wrongly deduce that if we want to get things done our way we should adopt this trick of leaving things up to God. I don't think that's what you meant. In the state you were describing, one truly doesn't have a preference for things to work out one way or the other. Is that true?

David: Yes. The state of being grateful for the way things are is the goal. It's not a trick to get what you want. If things turn out well, that's just a side effect. It's not the main purpose of surrender. Surrender is an aim and a goal in itself.

Let me read you a couple of answers that Sri Ramana gave to a devotee who was asking about surrender. They were recorded in the 1940s by Devaraja Mudaliar in *Day by Day with Bhagavan*:

Question: Does not total or complete surrender require that one should not have left even the desire for liberation or God?

Answer: Complete surrender does require that you have no desire of your own. You must be satisfied with whatever God gives you and that means having no desires of one's own.

Question: Now that I am satisfied on that point, I want to know what the steps are by which I could achieve surrender.

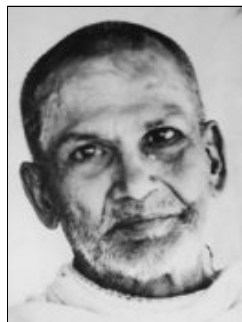
Answer: There are two ways. One is looking into the source of 'I' and merging into that source. The other is the feeling 'I am helpless by myself; God alone is all powerful and except by throwing myself completely on him, there is no other means of safety for me.' By this method one gradually develops the conviction that God alone exists and that the ego does not count. Both methods lead to the same goal. Complete surrender is another name for jnana or liberation.

In the first reply Sri Ramana gives the answer that true surrender

is being satisfied with whatever God gives you, without having any desire for your life to be any different. In the second answer he explains that one can approach this goal in a gradual way. I think that Sri Ramana knew that no one could immediately give up all thoughts, ideas, desires and responsibilities, so he encouraged devotees to do it in a gradual way. One can start on the path of surrender by handing over to God some of the petty responsibilities of life that we believe are ours to solve. When we feel that God has done a good job with managing them, we have more faith in Him and we are encouraged to hand over more and more of our life to Him. The stories that I narrated earlier belong to this phase of surrender.

Sri Ramana occasionally encouraged his devotees to give him all their problems. That is to say, to tell him about them, and then forget about them. One of his persistent images or metaphors was of a passenger on a train who insists on carrying his luggage on his own head instead of putting it on the floor and relaxing. The idea behind this is that God is running the world and looking after all its activities and problems. If we take some of these problems on our own heads, we just inflict unnecessary suffering on ourselves. Sri Ramana is telling us that God is driving the train that constitutes our life on this earth. We can sit down and relax with the knowledge that he is taking us to our destination, and not interfere, or we can imagine that we are responsible for it all. We can pace up and down the aisles of the train with 100lbs on our head if we want to. It's our choice.

When devotees surrendered their problems to Sri Ramana, it was the same as surrendering them to God. They were submitting to the same divine authority, surrendering to a living manifestation of that same power. Here are some statements that Sri Ramana made on this subject. I have taken them from a book I am currently working on. Each sentence was originally recorded by Muruganar in Tamil verse:



Muruganar

1. My devotees have the qualifications to rejoice abundantly, like children of an emperor.
2. Abandon the drama [of the world] and seek the Self within. Remaining within, I will protect you, [ensuring] that no harm befalls you.
3. If you inquire and know me, the indweller, in that state there will be no reason for you to worry about the world.
4. For the cruel disease of burning *samsara* to end, the correct regimen is to entrust all your burdens on me.
5. In order that your needless anxieties cease, make sure that all your burdens are placed on me through the brave act of depending totally on grace.
6. If you completely surrender all your responsibilities to me, I will accept them as mine and manage them.
7. When bearing the entire burden remains my responsibility, why do you have any worries?
8. Long ago you offered your body, possessions and soul to me, making them mine, so why do you still regard these things as 'I' and 'mine' and associate yourself with them?
9. Seek my grace within the Heart. I will drive away your darkness and show you the light. This is my responsibility.

These verses come from a sub-section I have entitled 'Bhagavan's Promises'. When people surrendered completely to him, he was more than happy to manage their lives for them. Just about everyone discovered that when she surrendered the burden of responsibility for her life to Sri Ramana, problems diminished or went away completely.

The Guru is primarily there to teach the truth, to bestow grace on his disciples and to bring about the liberation of the mature souls who come to him. But he also has this very nice sideline of being able to manage the affairs of his devotees much better than they can.

Maalok: Ramana Maharshi was a prime example of living detachment. However, it is said, if there was one thing that he had slight attachment to, it was Arunachala. Perhaps you could explain why the Maharshi never moved from Arunachala after reaching there as a teenager.

David: Arunachala has been a spiritual magnet for as long as records have been kept. Various saints, yogis and spiritual seekers have felt its call for at least 1,500 years, probably much longer. Some inexplicable power draws people to this place and keeps them here. Seen in this context, Ramana Maharshi is just the latest and most famous saint to feel the pull of this place. When he was very young, he had an intuitive knowledge that the word Arunachala denoted God or a heavenly realm, but at the time he didn't realize it was a place he could actually visit. He didn't find this out until he was in his early teens. A few weeks after he realized the Self at the age of sixteen, he left home, traveled to Arunachala and spent the rest of his life there.

Why this place? For him it was his father, his Guru and his God, Siva. It may sound strange to say that a mountain can be all these things, but Sri Ramana was not alone in seeing Arunachala in this light. This is what a famous local saint, [Guru Namasivaya](#), wrote a few hundred years ago:

Mountain who drives out the night of spiritual ignorance.

Mountain who is the lamp of true knowledge to devotees.

Mountain in the form of abundant knowledge.

Mountain who came to me, a mere dog,

As father, mother and *Sadguru*:

Annamalai.

Annamalai is the local Tamil name of the mountain. This is what the Tamil *purana* of Arunachala, also written centuries ago, has to say about the holiness of this place:

Beginning with these first ones and continuing up to the present day, many are those who have attained the deathless state of liberation through dwelling on Aruna [chala] in their thoughts, through lovingly speaking its praises, through hearing of it, and then coming to gaze upon it, through performing *pradakshina* of it on foot, through dwelling there in a state of righteousness, through walking in the path of truth there, through bathing in its broad tanks, and through carrying out good works, performing holy service in the temple and worshipping there at the feet of that Effulgent Light.

That is the tradition of this place. Throughout its history Arunachala has attracted ardent seekers and liberated them. Yet, surprisingly, it remains relatively unknown even within India.

Arunachala has always been regarded as a manifestation of Siva, not just a symbolic representation of Him, or a place where He lives. The mountain itself is a *lingam* that has the full power and authority of Siva Himself. This is what millions of South Indian believe, and their belief is backed up, authenticated by many great saints who have gone on record as saying that it was the power of this mountain that brought about their own spiritual liberation. Ramana Maharshi was one of them. He was quite categorical that Arunachala was his Guru, and that Arunachala had been the agent that brought about his own realization. Seen in this context, why should he not spend the rest of his physical life in its vicinity?

Sri Ramana loved this mountain passionately. He wrote devotional poetry about it that at times verged on the ecstatic, and in all the fifty-four years he lived here, he could never be persuaded to go more than a mile from the base of the mountain.

Maalok: How did the mountain of Arunachala get to be such a powerful place? Was it because of all the pilgrims who have been coming here for centuries and worshipping it?

David: This is a question that intrigues me, but I have no answer to it. Sri Ramana said, in one of his poems, 'Mysterious is the way it works, beyond all human understanding'. He clearly recognised its power, but I don't think he had any explanation for it.

Years ago I heard Lakshmana Swamy make the following remarks about the mountain. 'When I gaze at Arunachala, I know I am in the presence of *jnana*. There is the same energy coming off the hill that I felt when I sat in Bhagavan's presence.'

I don't think this kind of energy would accumulate from all the prayer and worship of devotees. In fact, I think it is the other way round. People offer worship here because, at some intuitive level, they feel the power coming off the mountain.

Lakshmana Swamy seems to sense spiritual power in unexpected places. In the days when he was more accessible, when he moved around more outside his compound, he would occasionally comment that he could sense small amounts of spiritual power in certain places, animals, trees, and even apparently inanimate objects. He seems to have an extra faculty that picks up these emanations. However, nothing remotely compared to the power that he felt radiating from the mountain of Arunachala. For him, for Sri Ramana, and for many other saints who have been drawn here, this mountain is radiating the power of the Self in a way that no other place is doing. Jnanasambandhar, a famous Tamil saint who came here in the sixth century, described it in one of his poems as a 'condensed mass of *jnana*'. I like that description. It echoes the principal myth of Arunachala in which Siva condenses himself from an effulgent column of light into the form of a mountain for the benefit of devotees who want a less blinding form to worship. Following this version of events, one can say that though the brightness of the original column of light has gone, the condensed spiritual radiance of Siva-*jnana* is still there. The energy that comes off the mountain is so intense, so awesome, even great saints such as Sri Ramana just gaze in wonder at it.



Arunachala
(Click on image to
enlarge)

When Lakshmana Swamy first moved back to Arunachala about twelve years ago, he initially lived in a rented room that had no windows facing the hill. He could only see a small outcrop of rock at the base of the western side of the mountain from one of his side windows. However, that was more than enough for him. Saradamma told me that he would sit by the window and gaze, in a state of rapture, at this tiny portion of the mountain for hours together. As with his own Guru, Sri Ramana, the power emanating from the mountain drew his attention to itself and kept it fixed there.

Sri Ramana once wrote in one of his verses to Arunachala:

'I have discovered a new thing! This hill, the lodestone of lives, arrests the movements of anyone who so much thinks of it, draws him face to face with it, and fixes him motionless like itself, to feed upon his soul thus ripened.

What a wonder is this!

When there is no mind to delude you into believing that you are just looking at a form of a mountain, the power of Arunachala compels your attention to such an extent, it is sometimes hard to look anywhere else.

I was once making the seating arrangements for one of Lakshmana Swamy's public *darshans*. I put his chair facing the hill.

Saradamma saw what I had done, laughed and said, 'If you leave it there, he won't notice anyone. He will spend the whole time gazing at the hill. If you want him to look at the people who come, put his chair so it faces away from the hill. Then there will be no distractions.'

I asked him once, 'How did this mountain come to be enlightened?' It seems a strange question to ask, but I couldn't think of phrasing it any other way. Here was this very solid mass of granite rock that was emanating the power of the Self. How did it get that way?

He said he didn't know and couldn't speculate. He could clearly feel its power, but he couldn't think of any scenario that would explain how it came about.

I tried a couple of leading questions, such as, 'Was there some enlightened being who took the form of this hill or became one with it in some way?' He said 'No' to that one and to all my other proffered suggestions. In the end we were back to Sri Ramana's comment, 'Mysterious is the way it works, beyond all human understanding.'

The preceding sentence, by the way, says, 'Look, there it stands as if insentient'. Ordinary people, people with minds, look at this mountain and see insentient rock. Those with true vision come here and see and feel the radiation of Siva-*jnana*.

Maalok: Is it true that Ramana Maharshi encouraged people to do a *pradakshina* around the sacred Arunachala mountain as often as possible? Isn't recommendation of this kind of practice a bit 'out-of-sync' with his general teaching of being still? Could you also explain the significance of doing this *pradakshina*?

David: Lucia Osborne, Arthur Osborne's wife, made an interesting comment in *The Mountain Path* about twenty-five years ago. She wrote that Sri Ramana never prescribed a spiritual practice for

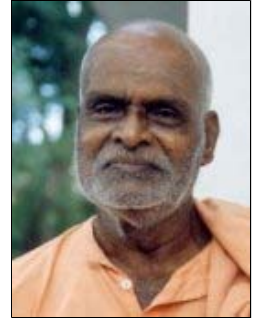
anyone unless he was first asked for advice. However, there was one exception to this rule: he often encouraged people to walk around the hill, even if they had not asked whether or not they should do it.

When Sri Ramana spoke of 'being still', he wasn't talking about sitting motionless on the floor. He was speaking instead about mental silence. He advocated *pradakshina* of Arunachala as a means of reaching this silence. Kunju Swami has recorded a story in which Sri Ramana speaks of a kind of 'walking *samadhi*' that sometimes overtakes one as one is doing the *pradakshina*.

It's all very illogical and not even Sri Ramana had an explanation of how and why it worked. If skeptics who wanted to be convinced of the efficacy of *pradakshina* came to him to ask him about it, he would say, 'Try it and see'. He had found from long experience that people who had completed one *pradakshina* would always enjoy it, and soon afterwards would want to do it again. After a few circuits of the hill, most people would be convinced that it was doing them some good. One became convinced by experience rather than by any sensible or rational explanation.

When Sri Ramana sent people off to do *pradakshina*, he was sending them to commune with his own Guru for a few hours. Walking around the base of the mountain, one is always aware of its looming presence. By being aware of the constantly changing form of the mountain as one walks around it, one is putting one's attention on a highly charged form of the divine. And once the mind has made contact with that divine form, the grace, the energy of that form begins to flow. This is what silences people as they open themselves to the mountain's power.

I should also mention that Sri Ramana taught that the power of this mountain is not dependent on whether or not one believes it to be divine. Sri Ramana said that it is like a fire. Those who approach it get burnt whether they believe in it or not.



Kunju Swami

Maalok: About you - what exactly made you leave everything and come to Tiruvannamalai in your early youth? Could you also share some of the surrounding circumstances, your state of mind, and the events that led to this move?

David: I first came across Sri Ramana's teachings in 1974 by reading one of the few books about him that had been published in the West. I read this book in a few hours and immediately my whole world view was transformed. It wasn't just a new piece of information that I could file away with all the other pieces of knowledge I had stored in my brain; it was a living transmission that completely changed the way I perceived myself and the world around me. I didn't have to think about the teachings or convince myself that they were true. I recognized the truth of them as soon as I read them.

Nor was it just one set of beliefs being replaced by another. It was more a case of a busy, searching mind being utterly silenced by an exposure to the light of a higher power. In the months preceding my discovery of Sri Ramana, I had bought and read many spiritual books. The information they contained had been stored in my memory, but none of it had truly touched me. When I read Ramana Maharshi's words for the first time, my mind actually stopped. I stopped searching and I stopped reading spiritual books. The words

had a power in them that silenced my mind. I didn't judge these words and decide that they were correct. The words themselves went straight inside me, stopped the busy-ness of my questing mind and gave me a state of silence that had within itself the conviction 'This is the truth'.

A few months later I dropped out of university and went to Ireland to meditate. I chose the west of Ireland because it was remote and cheap. I wanted to have a complete break from all the things I had been doing, all the people I had been associating with. I wanted to drop all the trivia that had accumulated in my life. I lived there alone - it was in the Limerick area if anyone wants to know - for about nine months, growing my own food and meditating. At the end of that period I had to leave because my landlady wanted her house back. I took a break by going to Israel for the winter, thinking that I would go back to Ireland the following spring. While I was in Ireland, the thought came to me, 'Why not have a quick trip to India before you settle down in Ireland again?' I decided to come here for a few weeks.

The weeks turned into months, and then the months turned into years. I am still here twenty-six years later. I think the key moment came while I was walking around Sri Ramana's *samadhi*. It must have been some time in 1976. I was wondering how much longer I would be able to stay here before I had to go 'home'. As I was walking, an understanding suddenly dawned in me: 'I don't have to go home. This is home. I already am home.'

This revelation actually stopped me in my tracks. I stopped walking and was suddenly filled with a flood of happiness, of relief. Something in me acknowledged that I was physically, spiritually and emotionally home. The thought of leaving, or having to leave, never arose again.

Maalok: What about your own relationship with Arunachala? Can you briefly elaborate on what this mountain has meant to you in the almost three decades you have spent here?

David: I came here initially because of Sri Ramana and his teachings. I just wanted to be in the place where he had lived and taught. Later, I realized that it had probably been the power of Arunachala that had brought me here. One of Sri Ramana's devotees, Sadhu Om, once wrote a nice poem about Arunachala, comparing it to a post to which a cow is attached by a long rope. The cow walks round and round the post, shortening the rope with each circuit. Eventually it is stuck next to the post, unable to move anywhere. That's how I feel sometimes. The mountain has pulled me here, shortened my tether inch by inch until I now feel that I am pressed up against it, unable to go anywhere else. It's a very happy imprisonment, though. I enjoy it. I have no desire to be anywhere else.

I see Arunachala as the source, the powerful fountainhead of the lineage that includes not only Sri Ramana and his disciples but also all the other saints who have lived here in the last 1,500 years. I am fascinated by these people, but I can't say why. Perhaps it is because all these people are conduits of this power that is Arunachala.

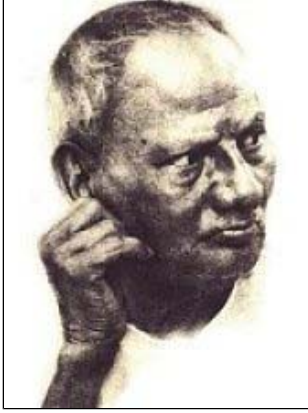
For me, Arunachala is the power of the divine in a physical form. If you want to ask, 'Why have you chosen to spend your adult

life near this mountain in South India?' I would first say, 'I don't think I had a choice. I was drawn here by a power that is beyond my control.' Then I might add, 'Why should I not choose to spend my days sitting in the presence of God, because I have to accept that this is what this mountain is.'

Maalok: David, it has indeed been a great joy to have this heart-to-heart conversation with you. I am very grateful to you for sharing your insights, and for your extraordinary generosity in sparing your time. On behalf of all of us, a heartfelt thank you!

Remembering Nisargadatta Maharaj

Page 1



Nisargadatta Maharaj

I was sitting with a visitor recently, looking at a new book on Nisargadatta Maharaj that consisted of photos and brief quotes. I knew some of the people in the pictures and narrated a few stories about them. This prompted a wider and lengthy discussion on some of the events that went on in Maharaj's presence. After she left I felt prompted to write down some of the things I had remembered since I had never bothered to record any of my memories of Maharaj before. As I went about recording the conversation, a few other memories surfaced, things I hadn't thought about for years. This, therefore, is a record of a pleasant afternoon's talk, supplemented by recollections of related incidents that somehow never came up.

Harriet: Every book I have seen about Maharaj, and I think I have looked at most of them, is a record of his teachings. Did no one ever bother to record the things that were going on around him? Ramakrishna had *The Gospel of Ramakrishna*, Ramana Maharshi had *Day by Day*, and a whole library of books by devotees that all talk about life with their Guru. Why hasn't Maharaj spawned a similar genre?

David: Maharaj very rarely spoke about his life, and he didn't encourage questions about it. I think he saw himself as a kind of doctor who diagnosed and treated the perceived spiritual ailments of the people who came to him for advice. His medicine was his presence and his powerful words. Anecdotes from his past were not part of the prescription. Nor did he seem interested in telling stories about anything or anyone else.

Harriet: You said 'rarely spoke'. That means that you must have heard at least a few stories. What did you hear him talk about?

David: Mostly about his Guru, Siddharameshwar Maharaj, and the effect he had had on his life. I think his love for his Guru and his gratitude to him were always present with him. Nisargadatta Maharaj used to do five *bhajans* a day simply because his Guru had asked him to. Siddharameshwar Maharaj had passed away in 1936, but Nisargadatta Maharaj was still continuing with these practices more than forty years later.

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In this page:

[What else did you glean about his background and the spiritual tradition he came from?](#)

[So far as you are aware Maharaj never publicly acknowledged anyone else's enlightenment?](#)

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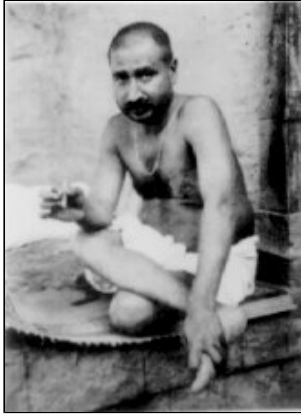
[Dutch Translation by Peter Roosendaal](#)



Ranjit Maharaj
(Click on image to enlarge)



Nisargadatta Maharaj
(Click on image to enlarge)



Siddharameshwar Maharaj



Maurice Frydman
(Click on image to
enlarge)

I once heard him say, 'My Guru asked me to do these five *bhajans* daily, and he never cancelled his instructions before he passed away. I don't need to do them any more but I will carry on doing them until the day I die because this is the command of my Guru. I continue to obey his instructions, even though I know these *bhajans* are pointless, because of the respect and gratitude I feel towards him.'

Harriet: Did he ever talk about the time he was with Siddharameshwar, about what passed between them?

David: Not on any of the visits I made. Ranjit Maharaj once came to visit during one of his morning sessions. They chatted in Marathi for a few minutes and then Ranjit left.

Maharaj simply said, 'That man is a *jnani*. He is a disciple of my Guru, but he is not teaching.'

End of story. That visit could have been a springboard to any number of stories about his Guru or about Ranjit, but he wasn't interested in talking about them. He just got on with answering the questions of his visitors.

Harriet: What else did you glean about his background and the spiritual tradition he came from?

David: He was part of a spiritual lineage that is known as the Navnath Sampradaya. This wasn't a secret because he had photos or pictures of many of the teachers from his lineage on his walls. He did a Guru *puja* every morning at the end of which he put *kum kum* on the foreheads of all the teachers in his lineage and on the photos of everyone else he thought was enlightened. I should mention that his walls were covered with portraits. Ramana Maharshi was there, and so were many other famous saints who were not part of his lineage. Mixed in with them were other pictures, such as one of Sivaji, a famous Marathi warrior from a few hundred years ago.

I once asked him why Sivaji had made it onto his walls, and he said, 'My son wants me to keep it there. It's the logo on our brand of beedis. He thinks that if it is mixed in with all the other pictures that I do *puja* to, sales will increase.'

Harriet: What did he say about all these photos of the people from his lineage? Did he never explain who they were?

David: Never. I only found out what their names were a few years later when I came across a book by R. D. Ranade, who was in a Karnataka branch of the *sampradaya*. He, or rather his organization, brought out a souvenir that contained the same photos I had seen on Maharaj's walls, along with a brief description of who they were.

I do remember one interesting story that Maharaj told about the *sampradaya*. He had been answering questions in his usual way when he paused to give us a piece of history:

'I sit here every day answering your questions, but this is not the way that the teachers of my lineage used to do their work. A few hundred years ago there were no questions and answers at all. Ours is a householder lineage, which means everyone had to go out and earn his living. There were no meetings like this where disciples met in large numbers with the Guru and asked him questions. Travel was difficult. There were no buses, trains and planes. In the old days the Guru did the traveling on foot, while the disciples stayed at home and looked after their families. The Guru walked from village to village to meet the disciples. If he met someone he thought was ready to be included in the *sampradaya*, he would initiate him with mantra of the lineage. That was the only teaching given out. The disciple would repeat the mantra and periodically the Guru would come to the village to see what progress was being made. When the Guru knew that he was about to pass away, he would appoint one of the householder-devotees to be the new Guru, and that new Guru would then take on the teaching duties: walking from village to village, initiating new devotees and supervising the progress of the old ones.'

I don't know why this story suddenly came out. Maybe he was just tired of answering the same questions again and again.

Harriet: I have heard that Maharaj occasionally gave out a mantra to people who asked. Was this the same mantra?

David: Yes, but he wasn't a very good salesman for it. I once heard him say, 'My Guru has authorised me to give out this mantra to anyone who asks for it, but I don't want you to feel that it is necessary or important. It is more important to find out the source of your beingness.'

Nevertheless, some people would ask. He would take them downstairs and whisper it in his or her ear. It was Sanskrit and quite long, but you only got one chance to remember it. He would not write it down for you. If you didn't remember it from that one whisper, you never got another chance.

Harriet: What other teaching instructions did Siddharameshwar give him? Was he the one who encouraged him to teach by answering questions, rather than in the more traditional way?

David: I have no idea if he was asked to teach in a particular way. Siddharameshwar told him that he could teach and give out the Guru mantra to anyone who asked for it, but he wasn't allowed to appoint a successor. You have to remember that Nisargadatta wasn't realised himself when Siddharameshwar passed away.

Harriet: What about personal details? Did Maharaj ever talk about his childhood or his family? Ramana Maharshi often told stories about his early life, but I don't recollect reading a single biographical incident in any of Maharaj's books.

David: That's true. He just didn't seem interested in talking about his past. The only story I remember him telling was more of a joke than a story. Some man came in who seemed to have known him for many years. He talked to Maharaj in Marathi in a very free and familiar way. No translations were offered but after about ten minutes all the Marathi-knowing people there simultaneously broke out into laughter. After first taking Maharaj's permission, one of the

translators explained what it was all about.

'Maharaj says that when he was married, his wife used to give him a very hard time. She was always bossing him around and telling him what to do. "Maharaj do this, Maharaj go to the market and buy that."'

She didn't call him Maharaj, of course, but I can't remember what she did call him.

The translator continued: 'His wife died a long time ago, when Maharaj was in his forties. It is usual for men of this age who are widowed to marry again, so all Maharaj's relatives wanted him to find another wife. He refused, saying, "The day she died I married freedom".'

I find it hard to imagine anyone bossing Maharaj around, or even trying to. He was a feisty character who stood no nonsense from anyone.

Harriet: From what I have heard 'feisty' may be a bit of a euphemism. I have heard that he could be quite bad-tempered and aggressive at times.

David: Yes, that's true, but I just think that this was part of his teaching method. Some people need to be shaken up a bit, and shouting at them is one way of doing it.

I remember one woman asking him, rather innocently, 'I thought enlightened people were supposed to be happy and blissful. You seem to be grumpy most of the time. Doesn't your state give you perpetual happiness and peace?'

He replied, 'The only time a *jnani* truly rejoices is when someone else becomes a *jnani*'.

Harriet: How often did that happen?

David: I don't know. That was another area that he didn't seem to want to talk about.

I once asked directly, 'How many people have become realised through your teachings?'

He didn't seem to welcome the question: 'What business is that of yours?' he answered. 'How does knowing that information help you in any way?'

'Well,' I said, 'depending on your answer, it might increase or decrease my level of optimism. If there is a lottery with only one winning ticket out of ten million, then I can't be very optimistic about winning. But if it's a hundred winning tickets out of a thousand, I would feel a lot better about my chances. If you could assure me that people are waking up here, I would feel good about my own chances. And I think feeling good about my chances would be good for my level of earnestness.'

'Earnestness' was one of the key words in his teachings. He thought that it was good to have a strong desire for the Self and to have all one's faculties turned towards it whenever possible. This strong focus on the truth was what he termed earnestness.

I can't remember exactly what Maharaj said in reply except that I know he didn't divulge any numbers. He didn't seem to think that it was any of mine or anyone else's business to know such information.

Harriet: Maybe there were so few, it would have been bad for your 'earnestness' to be told.

David: That's a possibility because I don't think there were many.

Harriet: Did you ever find out, directly or indirectly?

David: Not that day. However, I bided my time and waited for an

opportunity to raise the question again. One morning Maharaj seemed to be more-than-usually frustrated about our collective inability to grasp what he was talking about.

'Why do I waste my time with you people?' he exclaimed. 'Why does no one ever understand what I am saying?'

I took my chance: 'In all the years that you have been teaching how many people have truly understood and experienced your teachings?'

He was quiet for a moment, and then he said, 'One. Maurice Frydman.' He didn't elaborate and I didn't follow it up.

I mentioned earlier that at the conclusion of his morning *puja* he put *kum kum* on the forehead of all the pictures in his room of the people he knew were enlightened. There were two big pictures of Maurice there, and both of them were daily given the *kum kum* treatment. Maharaj clearly had a great respect for Maurice. I remember on one of my early visits querying Maharaj about some statement of his that had been recorded in *I am That*. I think it was about fulfilling desires.

Maharaj initially didn't seem to agree with the remarks that had been attributed to him in the book, but then he added, 'The words must be true because Maurice wrote them. Maurice was a *jnani*, and the *jnani*'s words are always the words of truth.'

I have met several people who knew Maurice, and all of them have extraordinary stories to tell about him. He visited Swami Ramdas in the 1930s and Ramdas apparently told him that this would be his final birth. That comment was recorded in *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* in the late 1930s, decades before he had his meetings with Maharaj. He was at various stages of his life a follower of Ramana Maharshi, Gandhi, and J. Krishnamurti. While he was a Gandhian he went to work for the raja of a small principality and somehow persuaded him to abdicate and hand over all his authority to people he had formerly ruled as an absolute monarch. His whole life is full of astonishing incidents such as these that are virtually unknown. I have been told by someone who used to be a senior Indian government official in the 1960s that it was Frydman who persuaded the then India Prime Minister Nehru to allow the Dalai Lama and the other exiled Tibetans to stay in India. Frydman apparently pestered him continuously for months until he finally gave his consent. None of these activities were ever publicly acknowledged because Frydman disliked publicity of any kind and always tried to do his work anonymously.

Harriet: What were Frydman's relations with Ramana Maharshi like? Did he leave a record?

David: There are not many stories in the Ramanasramam books, and in the few incidents that do have Maurice's name attached to them, Ramana is telling him off, usually for trying to give him special treatment. In an article that Maurice wrote very late in his life, he lamented the fact that he didn't fully appreciate and make use of Bhagavan's teachings and presence while he was alive.

However, he did use his extraordinary intellect and editing skills to bring out *Maharshi's Gospel* in 1939. This is one of the most important collections of dialogues between Bhagavan and his devotees. The second half of the book contains Frydman's questions and Bhagavan's replies to them. The quality of the questioning and the editing is quite extraordinary.

A few hundred years ago a French mathematician set a difficult

problem and challenged anyone to solve it. Isaac Newton solved it quickly and elegantly and sent off the solution anonymously. The French mathematician immediately recognized that Newton was the author and apparently said, 'A lion is recognized by his claws'.

I would make the same comments about the second half of *Maharshi's Gospel*. Though Frydman's name has never appeared on any of the editions of the book, I am absolutely certain that he was the editor and the questioner.

Harriet: So far as you are aware Maharaj never publicly acknowledged anyone else's enlightenment?

David: There may have been others but the only other one I know about, since I witnessed it first-hand, was a Canadian – at least I think he was Canadian – called Rudi. I had listened to some tapes before I first went to Maharaj and this man Rudi featured prominently on them. I have to say that he sounded utterly obnoxious. He was pushy, argumentative and aggressive; apparently Maharaj threw him out on several occasions. I had never met Rudi; I only knew him from the tapes I had heard.

Then one day Maharaj announced, 'We have a *jnani* coming to visit us this morning. His name is Rudi.' I laughed because I assumed that Maharaj was making fun of his pretensions to enlightenment. Maharaj could be quite scathing about people who claimed to be enlightened, but who weren't. Wolter Keers, a Dutch *advaita* teacher, was someone who fell into that category. Every so often he would come to Bombay to see Maharaj, and on every visit Maharaj would tell him off for claiming to be enlightened when he wasn't. On one visit he started lecturing Wolter before he had even properly entered the room. There was a wooden stairway that led directly into the room where Maharaj taught. As Wolter's head appeared above the top step, Maharaj suspended his other business and started laying into him.

'You are not enlightened! How dare you teach in the West, claiming that you are enlightened?'

On one of my other visits Wolter was due to arrive and Maharaj kept asking when he was going to appear.

'Where is he? I want to shout at him again. When is he going to arrive?'

On that particular visit I had to leave before Wolter came so I don't know what form the lecture took, but I suspect that it was a typically hot one.

Anyway, let's get back to Rudi. When Maharaj announced that a '*jnani*' was due, I assumed that Rudi was going to get the Wolter treatment. However, much to my amazement, Maharaj treated him as the genuine article when he finally showed up.

After spending a good portion of the morning wondering when Rudi was going to appear, Maharaj then asked him why he had bothered to come at all.

'To pay my respects to you and to thank you for what you have done for me. I am leaving for Canada and I came to say goodbye.'

Maharaj didn't accept this explanation: 'If you have come to this room, you must have some doubt left in you. If you were doubt-free, you wouldn't bother to come at all. I never visit any other teachers or Gurus because I no longer have any doubts about who I am. I don't need to go anywhere. Many people come to me and say, "You must visit this or that teacher. They are wonderful," but I never go because there is nothing I need from anyone. You must

want something you haven't got or have a doubt to come here. Why have you come?'

Rudi repeated his original story and then kept quiet. I was looking at him and he seemed to me to be a man who was in some inner state of ecstasy or bliss that was so compelling, he found it hard even to speak. I still wasn't sure whether Maharaj was accepting his credentials, but then the woman he had arrived with asked Maharaj a question.

Maharaj replied, 'Ask your friend later. He is a *jnani*. He will give you correct answers. Keep quiet this morning. I want to talk to him.'

It was at this point that I realised that Maharaj really did accept that this man had realised the Self. Rudi then asked Maharaj for advice on what he should do when he returned to Canada. I thought that it was a perfectly appropriate question for a disciple to ask a Guru on such an occasion, but Maharaj seemed to take great exception to it.

'How can you ask a question like that if you are in the state of the Self? Don't you know that you don't have any choice about what you do or don't do?'

Rudi kept quiet. I got the feeling that Maharaj was trying to provoke him into a quarrel or an argument, and that Rudi was refusing to take the bait.

At some point Maharaj asked him, 'Have you witnessed your own death?' and Rudi replied 'No'.

Maharaj then launched into a mini-lecture on how it was necessary to witness one's own death in order for there to be full realisation of the Self. He said that it had happened to him after he thought that he had fully realised the Self, and it wasn't until after this death experience that he understood that this process was necessary for final liberation. I hope somebody recorded this dialogue on tape because I am depending on a twenty-five-year-old memory for this. It seems to be a crucial part of Maharaj's experience and teachings but I never heard him mention it on any other occasion. I have also not come across it in any of his books.

Maharaj continued to pester Rudi about the necessity of witnessing death, but Rudi kept quiet and just smiled beatifically. He refused to defend himself, and he refused to be provoked. Anyway, I don't think he was in any condition to start and sustain an argument. Whatever state he was in seemed to be compelling all his attention. I got the feeling that he found articulating even brief replies hard work.

Finally, Rudi addressed the question and said, 'Why are you getting so excited about something that doesn't exist?' I assumed he meant that death was unreal, and as such, was not worth quarrelling about.

Maharaj laughed, accepted the answer and gave up trying to harass him.

'Have you ever had a teacher like me?' demanded Maharaj, with a grin.

'No,' replied Rudi, 'and have you ever had a disciple like me?'

They both laughed and the dialogue came to an end. I have no idea what happened to Rudi. He left and I never heard anything more about him. As they say at the end of fairy stories, he probably lived happily ever after.

Next: [I realised that it was not his nature to keep quiet. His](#)

teaching method was geared to arguing and talking.

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Remembering Nisargadatta Maharaj

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Nisargadatta Maharaj

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[What was Maharaj's attitude to Ramana Maharshi and his teachings? Did you ever discuss Bhagavan's teachings with him?](#)

[Did Maharaj ever confirm himself that this is what he was doing, or trying to do, with the people who came to him?](#)

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Harriet: You say that Maharaj never visited other teachers because he no longer had any doubts. Did he ever talk about other teachers and say what he thought of them?

David: He seemed to like J. Krishnamurti. He had apparently seen him walking on the streets of Bombay many years before. I don't think that Krishnamurti noticed him. Afterwards, Maharaj always spoke well of Krishnamurti and he even encouraged people to go and see him. One day Maharaj took a holiday and told everyone to go and listen to Krishnamurti instead. That, I think, shows a high level of approval.

The most infamous teacher of the late 1970s was Osho, or Rajneesh as he was in those days. I once heard Maharaj say that he respected the state that Rajneesh was in, but he couldn't understand all the instructions he was giving to all the thousands of foreigners who were then coming to India to see him. Although the subject only came up a couple of times while I was there, I got the feeling he liked the teacher but not the teachings. When Rajneesh's foreign 'sannyasins' showed up in their robes, he generally gave them a really hard time. I watched him throw quite a few of them out, and I saw him shout at some of them before they had even managed to get into his room.

I heard a story that he also encountered U. G. Krishnamurti in Bombay. I will tell you the version I heard and you can make up your own mind about it. It was told to me by someone who spent a lot of time with U. G. in the 1970s.

It seems that Maurice Frydman knew U. G. and also knew that he and Maharaj had never met, and probably didn't know about each other. He wanted to test the theory that one *jnani* can spot another *jnani* by putting them both in the same room, with a few other people around as camouflage. He organised a function and invited both of them to attend. U. G. spent quite some time there, but Maharaj only came for a few minutes and then left.

After Maharaj had left Maurice went up to U. G. and said, 'Did you see that old man who came in for a few minutes. Did you notice anything special? What did *you* see?'

U. G. replied, 'I saw a man, Maurice, but the important thing is, what did you see?'

The next day Maurice went to see Maharaj and asked, 'Did you



Maurice Frydman
(Click on image to enlarge)

see that man I invited yesterday?' A brief description of what he looked like and where he was standing followed.

Then Maurice asked, 'What did *you* see?'

Maharaj replied, 'I saw a man Maurice, but the important thing is, what did you see?'

It's an amusing story and I pass it on as I heard it, but I should say that U. G.'s accounts of his meetings with famous teachers sometimes don't ring true to me. I have heard and read his accounts of his meetings with both Ramana Maharshi and Papaji, and in both accounts Bhagavan and Papaji are made to do and say things that to me are completely out of character.

When Maharaj told Rudi that he had no interest in visiting other teachers, it was a very true statement. He refused all invitations to go and check out other Gurus. Mullarpattan, one of the translators, was a bit of a Guru-hopper in the 1970s, and he was always bringing reports of new teachers to Maharaj, but he could never persuade him to go and look at them. So, reports of meetings between Maharaj and other teachers are not common. Papaji ended up visiting Maharaj and had a very good meeting with him. In his biography he gives the impression that he only went there once, but I heard from people in Bombay that Papaji would often take his devotees there. He visited quite a few teachers in the 1970s, often when he was accompanying foreigners who had come to India for the first time. It was his version of showing them the sights. They would never ask questions; they would just sit quietly and watch what was going on.

Harriet: What was Maharaj's attitude to Ramana Maharshi and his teachings? Did you ever discuss Bhagavan's teachings with him?

David: He had enormous respect for both his attainment and his teachings. He once told me that one of the few regrets of his life was that he never met him in person. He did come to the ashram in the early 1960s with a group of his Marathi devotees. They were all on a South Indian pilgrimage tour and Ramanasramam was one of the places he visited.

With regard to the teachings he once told me, 'I agree with everything that Ramana Maharshi said, with the exception of this business of the heart-centre being on the right side of the chest. I have never had that experience myself.'

I discussed various aspects of Bhagavan's teachings with him and always found his answers to be very illuminating.

He asked me once, 'Have you understood Ramana Maharshi's teachings?'

Since I knew he meant 'Had I actually experienced the truth of them?', I replied, 'The more I listen to Maharaj, the more I understand what Bhagavan is trying to tell me'.

I felt that this was true at both the theoretical and experiential levels. His explanations broadened and deepened my intellectual understanding of Bhagavan's teachings and his presence also gave me experiential glimpses of the truth that they were all pointing towards.

I have to mention Ganesan's visit here. V. Ganesan is the grandnephew of Ramana Maharshi and in the 1970s he was the *de facto* manager of Ramanasramam. Nowadays, his elder brother Sundaram is in charge. Ganesan came to visit Maharaj for the first time in the late 1970s. As soon as he arrived Maharaj stood up and

began to collect cushions. He made a big pile of them and made Ganesan sit on top of the heap. Then, much to everyone's amazement, Maharaj cleared a space on the floor and did a full-length prostration to him.

When he stood up, he told Ganesan, 'I never had a chance to prostrate to your great-uncle Ramana Maharshi, so I am prostrating to you instead. This is my prostration to him.'

Harriet: That's an extraordinary story! Were you there that day?

David: Yes, I was sitting just a few feet away. But the truly extraordinary thing for me was what happened next. Maharaj and Ganesan chatted for a while, about what I can't remember.

Then Maharaj made an astonishing offer: 'If you stay here with me for two weeks, I guarantee you will leave in the same state as your great-uncle Ramana Maharshi.'

Ganesan left that day and didn't come back. I couldn't believe he had turned down an offer like that. If someone of the stature of Maharaj had made an offer like that to me, I would have immediately nailed myself to the floor. Nothing would have induced me to go away before the time was up.

When I returned to Ramanasramam I asked Ganesan why he hadn't stayed.

'I didn't think he was serious,' he replied. 'I just thought he was joking.'

It was during this visit that Maharaj asked Ganesan to start giving talks in Ramanasramam. 'I have been to Ramanasramam,' he said, 'and you have wonderful facilities there. Many pilgrims come, but no one is giving them any teachings. It is a sacred and holy place but people are leaving it and coming here because no one is teaching there. Why should they have to travel a thousand miles to sit in this crowded room when you have such a great place? You need to start giving talks there. You need to start explaining what Ramana Maharshi's teachings are.'

Ganesan was unwilling to follow that advice either, or at least not at the time. There is a strong tradition that no one is allowed to teach in Ramanasramam. Ramana Maharshi is still the teacher there and no one is allowed to replace him. It is not just a question of having a new Guru there; the ashram management does not even encourage anyone to publicly explain what Ramana Maharshi's teachings mean. Ganesan didn't want to rock the boat and incur the ire of his family and the devotees who might object, so he kept quiet. It is only in the last few years that he has started teaching, but he is doing it in his own house, rather than in the ashram itself. The ashram is still very much a teacher-free zone.

I talked to Ganesan recently about Maharaj and he told me a nice story about a Frenchwoman whom he took there.

'When I started to visit Maharaj some of Bhagavan's devotees criticized me for abandoning Bhagavan and going to another Guru. Many of them seemed to think that going to see Maharaj indicated that I didn't have sufficient faith in Bhagavan and his teachings. I didn't see it that way. I have visited many great saints, and I never felt that I was abandoning Bhagavan or being disrespectful to him by going on these trips. A Frenchwoman, Edith Deri, was one of the women who complained in this way. We were in Bombay together and I somehow convinced her to accompany me on a visit to Maharaj. She came very reluctantly and seemed determined not

to enjoy the visit.

'When we arrived Maharaj asked her if she had any questions. She said that she hadn't.

"So why have you come to see me?" he asked.

"I have nothing to say," she replied. "I don't want to talk while I am here."

"But you must say something," said Maharaj. "Talk about anything you want to. Just say something."

"If I say something, you will then give some reply, and everyone will then applaud because you have given such a wonderful answer. I don't want to give you the opportunity to show off."

'It was a very rude answer, but Maharaj didn't show any sign of annoyance.

'Instead, he replied, "Water doesn't care whether it is quenching thirst or not".

'And then he repeated the sentence, very slowly and with emphasis. He often repeated himself like this when he had something important to say.

'Edith told me later that this one sentence completely destroyed her skepticism and her negativity. The words stopped her mind, blew away her determination to be a spoilsport, and put her into a state of peace and silence that lasted for long after her visit.'

Harriet: I have read on many occasions that Ramana Maharshi preferred to teach in silence. I never get that impression with Nisargadatta Maharaj. Did people ever get a chance to sit in silence with him?

David: During the years that I visited it was possible to meditate in his room in the early morning. I forget the exact timings, but I think that it was for an hour and a half. Maharaj would be there, but he would be going about his normal morning activities. He would potter around doing odd jobs; he would appear with just a towel around his waist if he was about to have a bath; sometimes he would sit and read a newspaper. I never got the feeling that he was making a conscious effort to teach in silence in the way that Ramana Maharshi did by looking at people and transmitting some form of grace. However, he did seem to be aware of the mental states of all the people who were sitting there, and he not infrequently complained about them.

'I know who is meditating here and who is not,' he suddenly announced one morning, 'and I know who is making contact with his beingness. Only one person is doing that at the moment. The rest of you are all wasting your time.' Then he carried on with whatever he was doing.

It was true that many people didn't go there to meditate. They just saw it as an opportunity to be with him in his house. They might be sitting cross-legged on his floor, but most of the time they would be peeping to see what he was doing instead of meditating.

One morning he got tired of being spied on this way and exploded: 'Why are you people cluttering up my floor like this? You are not meditating; you are just getting in the way! If you want to go and sit somewhere, go and sit on the toilet for an hour! At least you will be doing something useful there.'

Harriet: What about the other times of the day, when he was available for questioning? Did he ever sit in silence during those periods?

David: There were two periods when it was possible to question him: one in the late morning and one in the evening. Translators would be available at both sessions. He encouraged people to talk during these sessions, or at least he did when I first started going to see him. Later on, he would use these sessions to give long talks on the nature of consciousness. He never sat quietly if no one had anything to say. He would actively solicit questions, but if no one wanted to talk to him, he would start talking himself.

I only ever had one opportunity to sit with him in complete silence and that was at the beginning of the summer monsoon. When the monsoon breaks in Bombay, usually around the end of the first week of June, there are very heavy rains that bring the city to a standstill. The storm drains are generally clogged, and for a day or so people are walking round in knee-deep water. And not just water. The sewers overflow and the animals that live in them drown. Anyone brave enough to go for a paddle would be wading through sewage, waterlogged garbage and the corpses of whatever animals had recently drowned. Public transport comes to a halt since in many places the water level is too high to drive through.

One afternoon two of us waded through the floodwaters to Maharaj's door. We were both staying in a cheap lodge about 200 yards away, so it wasn't that much of a trek. We scrubbed off the filth with water from a tap on the ground floor and made our way up to Maharaj's room. He seemed very surprised to see us. I think he thought that the floods would keep everyone away. He said in Marathi that there would be no session that afternoon because none of the translators would be able to make it. I assume he wanted us to leave and go home, but we both pretended that we didn't understand what he was trying to tell us. After one or two more unsuccessful attempts to persuade us to go, he gave up and sat in a corner of the room with a newspaper in front of his face so that we couldn't even look at him. I didn't care. I was just happy to be sitting in the same room as him. I sat there in absolute silence with him for over an hour and it was one of the most wonderful experiences I ever had with him. I felt an intense rock-solid silence descend on me that became deeper and deeper as the minutes passed. There was just a glow of awareness that filled me so completely, thoughts were utterly impossible. You don't realise what a monstrous imposition the mind is until you have lived without it, completely happily, completely silently, and completely effortlessly for a short period of time. For most of this time I was looking in the direction of Maharaj. Sometimes he would turn a page and glance in our direction, and when he did he still seemed to be irritated that we hadn't left. I was smiling inwardly at his annoyance because it wasn't touching me in any way. I had no self-consciousness, no embarrassment, no feeling of being an imposition. I was just resting contentedly in my own being.

After just over an hour of this he got up and shooed us both out. I prostrated and left. Later on, I wondered why he didn't sit in silence more often since there was clearly a very powerful quietening energy coming off him when he was silent. Ramana Maharshi said that speaking actually interrupted the flow of the silent energy he was giving out. I have often wondered if the same thing happened with Maharaj.

Harriet: And what was your conclusion?

David: I realised that it was not his nature to keep quiet. His

teaching method was geared to arguing and talking. That's what he felt most comfortable doing.

Harriet: Can you elaborate on that a little more?

David: I should qualify what I am about to say by stating that most of it is just my own opinion, based on observing him deal with the people who came to him. It doesn't come from anything I heard him say himself.

When people first came to see him, he would encourage them to talk about their background. He would try to find out what spiritual path you were on, and what had brought you to him. In the face of Maharaj's probing questions visitors would end up having to justify their world-view and their spiritual practices. This would be one level of the interaction. At a deeper and more subtle level Maharaj would be radiating an energy, a *sakti*, that quietened your mind and made you aware of what lay underneath the mind and all its ideas and concepts. Now imagine these two processes going on simultaneously. With his mind the questioner has just constructed and articulated a version of his world-view. Underneath, though, he will be feeling the pull of his beingness, the knowledge of what is truly real, as opposed to the ideas that he merely thinks to be real. Maharaj's energy will be enhancing awareness of that substratum all the time. At some point the questioner will become acutely aware of what seem to be two competing realities: the conceptual structure he has just outlined, and the actual experience that underlies it. There was a certain look that appeared on some people's faces when this happened: a kind of indecisive 'which way should I go?' look. Sometimes the questioner would realise immediately that all his ideas and beliefs were just concepts. He would drop them and rest in the beingness instead. This, for me, was the essence of Maharaj's teaching technique. He wouldn't try to convince you by argument. He would instead make you argue yourself into a position that you felt to be true, and then he would undercut that position by giving you a taste of the substratum that underlay all concepts. If you were ready for it, you would drop your attachment to your concepts and rest in what lay underneath them. If not, you would blunder ahead, going deeper and deeper into the minefield of the mind. Some people got it quickly. Others, who were desperate for a structure to cling to, would come back again and again with questions that were designed merely to refine their understanding of his teachings.

Talking to visitors and arguing with them was an essential part of this technique. For it to work effectively Maharaj required that visitors talk about themselves and their world-view because he needed them to see that all these ideas were just concepts having no ultimate reality. He needed people to look at their concepts, understand their uselessness and then reject them in favour of direct experience.

I should mention here the limitations he put on the types of question that he was willing to answer. He would sometimes tell new people, 'I am not interested in what you have heard or read. I am not interested in second-hand information that you have acquired from somewhere else. I am only interested in your own experience of yourself. If you have any questions about that, you can ask me.'

Later, after you had had your initial dialogues with him, he would introduce an even more stringent test for questions: 'I am not

interested in answering questions that assume the existence of an individual person who inhabits a body. I don't accept the existence of such an entity, so for me such questions are entirely hypothetical.'

This second constraint was a real conversation killer. You couldn't say, 'How do I get enlightened?' or 'What do I do?' because all such questions presuppose the existence of an 'I', an assumption that Maharaj always used to reject.

I still have vivid memories of him listening as translators explained in Marathi what some questioner had said. As he understood the gist of what the question was Maharaj's face would sometimes turn to a scowl. He would clench his fist, bang it on the floor and shout '*Kalpana! Kalpana!*' which means 'Concept! Concept!' That would sometimes be the only answer the questioners would get. Maharaj was definitely not interested in massaging visitor's concepts. He wanted people to drop them, not discuss them.

When this second restriction effectively cut off most of the questions that people like to ask Gurus, Maharaj would fill the vacuum by giving talks about the nature of consciousness. Day after day he would continue with the same topic, often using the same analogies. He would explain how it arises, how it manifests and how it subsides. In retrospect I think he was doing what the ancient rishis of India did when they told their disciples 'You are *Brahman*'. When a *jnani* who is established in *Brahman* as *Brahman* says to a disciple, 'You are *Brahman*,' he is not merely conveying a piece of information. There is a power and an authority in the words that, in certain cases, makes the listener become and experience *Brahman* as he hears the words. This is a power and an authority that only *jnanis* have. Other people can say 'You are consciousness,' 'You are *Brahman*,' endlessly, but these will just be pieces of information that you can store in your mind. When a *jnani* tells you this, the full authority of his state and the full force that lies behind it are conveyed in the statement. If you take delivery of that information in the heart, in consciousness, then you experience that state for yourself. If you take delivery in your mind, you just store it there as an interesting piece of information.

When Maharaj told you endlessly 'You are consciousness,' if you received that information in utter inner silence, it activated an awareness of consciousness to such an extent that you felt, 'He isn't just telling me something; he is actually describing what I am, right now in this moment'.

Harriet: Did this ever happen to you?

David: Yes, and I think that this is what he was referring to when he talked about 'getting the knowledge'. It wasn't an intellectual knowledge he was talking about, and it wasn't Self-realisation either. It was a state in which concepts temporarily dissolved leaving a simple awareness of the being that underlay them. While they lasted the states were very useful; they gave you the conviction and the direct experience that there was something real and enduring that exists whether the mind is there or not.

Harriet: All this is very interesting, but as you have said, a lot of it is your own personal conjecture. Did Maharaj ever confirm himself that this is what he was doing, or trying to do, with the people who came to him?

David: Not directly. He never explained or analysed his teaching methods, or not while I was there. Most of what I have just said comes from my own experience and my own interpretation of what I saw going on there. Other people may have other theories to explain what was going on. However, the facts of the matter are indisputable. People came to Maharaj, had talks or arguments with him, and at some point dropped their accumulation of ideas because they had been convinced that a direct experience invalidated all the long-held cherished notions they had accumulated.

Let me tell you about one conversation I had with because it gives some good circumstantial evidence for what I have just been trying to explain. Firstly, I should mention that I sometimes used to argue with Maharaj simply because I knew that he liked people to argue with him. He seemed to like the cut and thrust of debate, and if no one had anything to say or ask, I would pick up the ball and start a discussion with him.

I can't remember any more exactly what we talked about on this particular day, but I do remember that we spoke for about five minutes, during which time I was ostensibly pointing out what I claimed were contradictions in his teachings. He, meanwhile, was doing his best to convince me that no contradictions were involved. It was all very good-humoured and I think he knew that I was only disputing with him because, firstly, we both liked talking and arguing about spiritual topics and, secondly, no one else had any urgent questions to ask. After about five minutes, though, he decided to bring the discussion to a close.

'I don't think you really understand the purpose of my dialogues here. I don't say things simply to convince people that they are true. I am not speaking about these matters so that people can build up a philosophy that can be rationally defended, and which is free of all contradictions. When I speak my words, I am not speaking to your mind at all. I am directing my words directly at consciousness. I am planting my words in your consciousness. If you disturb the planting process by arguing about the meaning of the words, they won't take root there. Once my words have been planted in consciousness, they will sprout, they will grow, and at the appropriate moment they will bear fruit. It's nothing to do with you. All this will happen by itself. However, if you think about the words too much or dispute their meaning, you will postpone the moment of their fruition.'

All this was said in a very genial tone. However, at this point, he got very, very serious.

Glowering at me he said very sternly, 'Enough talking. Be quiet and let the words do their work!'

End of conversation.

I always recollect this exchange with happiness and optimism. I feel I have been graced by his presence and further graced by the words of truth he has planted within me. I think those words will always be with me and I know that at the appropriate moment they will bloom.

Next: [He was directing his words at the consciousness within you in an attempt to make you aware of who you really were](#)

Remembering Nisargadatta Maharaj

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Harriet: Have you obeyed his instructions? Have you stopped thinking about the teachings?

David: Until you showed up today I hadn't really thought about the teachings for years. I haven't even read many of the new books of dialogues that have come out about him. That answer I gave a few minutes ago, 'The more I listen to Maharaj, the more I understand what Bhagavan is trying to tell me,' is in one of the books but I didn't find out until a few years ago.

My former wife Vasanta was reading the book and she said, 'There is someone here from Ramanasramam. Do you know who it is?'

She read a few lines and I realised that it was me. I used to read *I am That* cover to cover about once a year, but I don't even do that any more. Sometimes, if I am in the Ramanasramam library, I pick up *I am That* and read the opening sequence of chapter twenty-three. It is a beautiful description of the *jnani's* state that I never tire of reading. Other than that, I rarely read or think about the teachings any more.

Having said that, I think it would be correct to say that I have more than enough other concepts in my head which are all acting as a herbicide on the words of truth that Maharaj planted within me. However, I have great faith in the irresistible power of Maharaj's words. Sooner or later they will bear fruit.

Harriet: Ramesh Balsekar used to say, 'The only effective effort is the immediate apperception of reality'. Some people would take that to mean that if you don't get the direct experience as the Guru, in this case Maharaj, is talking to you, you are not going to get it at all. Are you sure you are not just suffering from a case of wishful thinking?

David: There is something in what you say. If you could keep your intellect out of the way when Maharaj was speaking, his words, and the authority behind them, would do their work. When he spoke he wasn't asking you to join in the process at all. How could he be asking you to do anything when he knew that you didn't exist? He wasn't asking you to understand, and he wasn't saying, 'Do this and you will be enlightened'. He wasn't addressing you at all. He was directing his words at the consciousness within you in an attempt to make you aware of who you really were. However, if his words

didn't immediately produce results, he knew that they might deliver the goods later on. Remember what happened in his own case. Siddharameshwar told him that he was *Brahman*. Nisargadatta struggled with this for three years until he finally dropped his doubts and realised it to be the truth.

There is a power in a *jnani's* words and that power does not dissipate two seconds after the *jnani* has uttered them. It lingers and it carries on being effective; it carries on doing its work.

Harriet: Did Maharaj himself corroborate this?

David: Yes. I can't remember how the subject came up, but I heard him say, 'The words of enlightened beings have a power that makes them endure. The great saints of the past gave out their teachings, and those teachings have survived because there is an inherent power and authority in them. Other people may have been saying the same thing at the same time, but the words of those people have disappeared because there was no power in them. The words of *jnanis* have endured because they have the power and authority of the Self behind them.'

I mentioned this answer to Papaji when I was interviewing him a few years ago. He gave it his whole-hearted endorsement.

Harriet: When you say that the words 'have endured' does that mean that they have simply endured in books, as remembered quotations, or do they still have the power to awaken people, even centuries after they were spoken? Is not the immediate presence of the Guru necessary for that?

David: I think I would have to say that a living human Guru is necessary for all but the most mature to realise the Self. However, once you have seen a real Guru and been with him, his presence is always with you. You can tune into his presence, his grace, and his power in any number of ways: through his photo, through thinking about him, and through reading his words.

Harriet: Again, I feel compelled to ask, 'Is this your own opinion or do you have some support from Maharaj to back it up?'

David: I remember a conversation I had with Maharaj on my first visit. I can't remember how we got round to the subject, but we ended up talking about the power of the Guru and the various channels it manifested through. I had been deeply impressed and deeply moved by *I am That*, and I told him so.

Me: For several months I have been reading *I am That*. Through those words I felt a very strong connection with you and the teachings. Can one have a connection with a Guru simply by reading his words, or is it necessary to come in person to see him?

Maharaj: The words will do their work wherever you hear or read them. You can come here and listen to them in person, or you can read them in a book. If the teacher is enlightened, there will be a power in them.

Me: In my particular case I read the words of a Guru who was still alive, and those words compelled me to come here and see you. Perhaps your words had such a strong effect because you are still alive and teaching. I made contact with a living teacher, a living presence. What about a hypothetical case of someone picking up *I am That* in fifty years' time, and in a country several thousand miles away. That person will never have a

chance to see you. Will those words still have the power to transform and awaken?

Maharaj: Time and space exist in your mind, not in the Self. There is no limit to the power of the Self. The power of the Self is always present, always working, always the same. What varies is the readiness and willingness of people to turn their attention to it. If someone picks up this book ten thousand miles away in a thousand years' time, those words will do their work if the reader is in the right state to listen to and assimilate the words.

He didn't actually say that one could get enlightened by reading the words of a dead Guru, but he was quite clear that the words of an enlightened being, even in book form, were charged with a power that future generations could tune into. I think I asked this particular question because of my relationship with Ramana Maharshi. I was the 'hypothetical' person in the question who had discovered the words of great but deceased Guru. I suppose I really wanted to know whether Ramana Maharshi could be the Guru for someone like me who had been born years after he passed away. Maharaj didn't really answer that question for me, but he did convince me that a considerable part of the power and the authority of Guru could be found in his recorded teachings.

Over time, I came to the conclusion that a living human Guru really is necessary for the vast majority of people, but at the same time I have a great respect for the power that resides in the recorded words of such people.

Harriet: Was this particular dialogue recorded? I think it would be quite an important one for the many people such as myself who have only discovered Maharaj in the years since he passed away.

David: I doubt it. It was a very quiet afternoon session, and only a few of us were there. There were never any organised recordings. People who had a tape recorder would bring it along and make a recording from wherever they were sitting in the room. In the last couple of years several people were doing this, but when I first went, hardly anyone was doing it.

Harriet: You spoke about 'readiness' and 'willingness to listen' as being key factors. Did Maharaj ever speak about how or why some people got the direct experience, while most people didn't?

David: I did talk to him once about this. It was on one of my later visits. I had gone there with a friend of mine, Cary McGraw, and I discovered that it was Cary's birthday that day. When he told me, we were sitting in a caf  on Grant Road in the interval between the end of the *bhajans* and the start of the morning question-and-answer session. While Maharaj's room was being swept and cleaned, we all had to disappear for half an hour or so. Most of us would go for a tea or coffee break on Grant Road.

I asked Cary what he would like for a birthday present and he replied, 'Go back in there and have a good argument with Maharaj. I used to love to listen to you when you used to harass him about his teachings, but nowadays you hardly open your mouth at all. Go back in there and get him fired up about something. That will be my birthday treat.'

I didn't feel much like asking anything, and I definitely didn't

feel like embarking on a full-blown debate. I think by that time Maharaj had finally subdued my argumentative tendencies; I was quite content just to sit at the back and listen to what everyone else had to say.

We went back in, but I had no idea what to talk about. When everyone had settled down, Cary gave me a nudge and I suddenly found myself talking about why some people get enlightened and others not.

'Ramana Maharshi,' I said, 'got enlightened in a few minutes. It took you three years from the moment you met your Guru until you realised the Self. Other people try for fifty years and don't succeed. Why is it like this? Are the people who try all their lives and fail doing something wrong?'

Most other Hindu teachers would answer a question like this by saying that some people had more or less finished their work in previous lives and were therefore able to realise the Self very quickly in this life. This wasn't an option for Maharaj because he steadfastly refused to accept that reincarnation took place at all. This itself was a little strange to me because in the period that I used to visit him the dust jacket of *I am That* reproduced a dialogue with him in which he explained in quite some detail how reincarnation took place. However, in the era that I visited him I never once heard him accept the validity of reincarnation, and he frequently said it didn't happen. My question was really, 'If one discounts the theory of reincarnation, which you seem to do, how can someone like Ramana Maharshi get enlightened with no desire for it, no effort and no practice, while everyone else struggles unsuccessfully for decades and fails?'

'It's the chemical,' announced Maharaj. 'Some people are born with a pure chemical and some are not. Those with a pure chemical get enlightened, and those with an impure chemical don't.'

'The chemical' was one of Maharaj's idiosyncratic analogies or metaphors. I think it was derived from the chemical on a roll of film. We are all issued with a 'chemical' at the moment of conception, said Maharaj, and that is our destiny for this life. In one sense it is like a roll of film, a script that has been given to us for this life. Traditional Hinduism teaches that we have *prarabdha* karma, an unchangeable destiny for this life that is an inevitable result of actions that have been performed in previous lives. Maharaj couldn't incorporate past-life activities into his 'chemical' theory, but he did have an alternative selection of factors to offer.

I can't remember whether it was during this particular conversation or on some other day, but I remember asking him about the components of 'the chemical'. He replied that it was a combination of a wide variety of factors: parents' genes, astrological configurations at the time of conception, the future environment that one was going to be brought up in – these were just a few that he mentioned. These all coalesced at a particular moment and issued a body, or rather an embryo, with its appointed destiny.

'This is all very deterministic,' I said. 'If the purity of the chemical determines whether or not we get enlightened, why should we even care about it or not? What is the point of trying or not trying, wanting or not wanting, if the purity of the chemical has already decided the matter for us in advance? We may as well all go home.'

Maharaj replied, 'No, it is not completely determined in advance. The vast majority of people in the world are born with a dirty chemical. Nothing they do or don't do will make any difference. Enlightenment is not for them, and most of them won't even care about such matters. At the other end of the spectrum there will be an extremely small number of very pure beings who will become aware of their true nature without any striving or inclination.'

He didn't say so, but I assume he would have put Ramana Maharshi in this category.

'Between these two extremes,' continued Maharaj, 'there are a small number of people whose chemical is only slightly impure. These people have a chance to get enlightened. If they can meet with a Guru who can show them the truth and if their earnestness and seriousness are high enough, they can purify their slightly dirty chemical and find out who they really are. That is why we are all here today. People who come to a teacher with a strong thirst for freedom are the ones who have only a few impurities. They are the ones for whom liberation is possible.'

Harriet: So did he think that the people who came to him were 'advanced'? There must have been a mixture of all kinds of people. They couldn't all have been candidates for liberation.

David: Yes, there was a very eclectic mix of people there, from curiosity seekers to people who had travelled half way round the world because they were desperate for liberation and thought that Maharaj could help them. I sometimes used to sit next to a homoeopathic doctor who lived a few streets away. He had no interest in liberation and just saw Maharaj as a good source of entertainment.

'This is the best show in the neighbourhood,' he told me once. 'I just come here because I like watching how Maharaj deals with all the people who come. I don't believe a word he says, but he puts on a good show.'

This man, incidentally, told me that Maharaj's language in the original Marathi was occasionally very crude and vulgar. He told me that the translators, who were all respectable, middle-class Hindus, were probably too embarrassed to pass on the full force of his vulgarity. At the end of the sessions he would take me aside on the street outside and take great delight in telling me about all the various sexual jokes and innuendos that the translators had omitted tell us. I think the doctor's entertainment included watching his neighbours squirm as they listened to Maharaj's more outrageous remarks.

Maharaj to some extent determined the sort of people who were likely to come and stay by setting the agenda on what he was willing to talk about and what he wasn't. He wasn't interested in what he called 'kindergarten lessons'. That meant he generally refused to talk about many of the tenets of traditional Hinduism: ritual worship, karma and reincarnation, common practices such as *japa*, things like that. A large proportion of the foreigners who were there had come because they had read *I am That*. They wanted to talk about liberation, not traditional Hindu practices and traditions, and Maharaj was happy to oblige them. The people who wanted to talk about other things soon left to find somewhere more suitable for their inclinations and interests. Some, though, came with traditional ideas and beliefs and fell under the spell of Maharaj

and his radical teachings, but I think these people were in the minority.

I remember Mullarpattan telling us one day, 'I was a traditional Ram *bhakta* when I first arrived here. I thought that if I could have a vision of Ram, I would be sure to join him in Vaikunta [Ram's heavenly realm] when I died. The first day I came, Maharaj told me that Vaikunta didn't exist. I was very shocked to hear a Guru speak like this, but I felt attracted to him and I stayed on. Within a short period of time I dropped all my ideas about the gods and their heavens.'

Some of the other local people were very much interested in Maharaj's uncompromising teachings on liberation, but during the time that I was there, the foreigners generally outnumbered the locals by about three to one in the morning question-and-answer session. This could have been because many of the Bombay devotees had to go out to work, but even on weekends and holidays, the foreigners always outnumbered the Indians.

There was a separate session in the evening that was conducted in Marathi. We were never invited to that because there wasn't enough room for everyone, so I have no idea what went on in those sessions.

Harriet: Did you get the feeling that the foreigners were treated a little differently from the local people?

David: I would just say that we had different attitudes, different backgrounds and, for the most part, different aspirations. When we spoke to Maharaj, his answers reflected these differences.

One morning a new Indian couple arrived and asked Maharaj in English a series of questions about how to live a detached spiritual life while they were in the middle of all their family and work responsibilities. This is a standard question in India and everyone in the guru business must have a standard answer to it. Maharaj dealt with them very politely and respectfully and talked to them for about fifteen minutes. At the end of that period he asked them to leave. This was a little bit unusual. Usually, when a questioner had finished talking to Maharaj he would go back to his seat and listen to what everyone else had to say.

On this occasion Maharaj watched them disappear down his staircase. He waited about ten seconds more before bursting into a delighted laughter.

Slapping his thigh, he said, 'That is the sort of boring conversation I used to have every day before all you foreigners came along!'

I think he enjoyed talking to people who didn't come along to talk about all their family or work problems. He also knew he could be more irreverent and risqué with the foreigners, which was something he enjoyed.

Harriet: Can you give me an example?

David: One morning he looked around and noticed that there were no local people there at all except for the one translator.

A mischievous look appeared on his face and he said, 'Three things are absolutely necessary for human life: food, oxygen and sex.'

We all perked up. This was something different from the usual lecture on consciousness. We waited for him to continue, to develop his theme and explain in more detail, but he refused to elaborate.

Instead he said, 'Come on! Somebody dispute that statement. It's very controversial. Somebody disagree with me.'

It looked like he wanted to start an argument, but about what wasn't clear.

When no one else seemed interested in disputing his statement, I stepped into the breach to be the fall guy.

'If you don't breathe for a few minutes, you die,' I began. 'If you don't eat for a few weeks, you die. But I have never heard of anyone dying because they didn't have sex. How can you say that it is essential for human existence?'

Maharaj refused to explain himself. Instead he just repeated himself.

'Three things are absolutely necessary for human life: food, oxygen and sex.'

I couldn't see where he was going with the conversation, or where he wanted me to go with it.

'Are you saying that we should all have sex because if we don't we will all die?'

I was trying to provoke him into revealing why he had suddenly brought this topic up.

'No, I'm not saying that at all. I'm simply saying, 'Three things are absolutely necessary for human life: food, oxygen and sex.'

I tried a couple of other approaches but didn't get anywhere, and no one else in the room seemed willing to pitch in and help out. He just kept on repeating his original statement. After a few minutes he heard footsteps on the stairs. He immediately started talking about consciousness, and as the new visitors, a group of local people, came into the room, he was well into one of his standard explanations. He obviously didn't feel comfortable discussing sex in front of his Marathi devotees. I never did find out what the point of his statement was because he never brought it up again.

Next: [Maharaj was the first person to tell me that this was what I should be doing with my life.](#)

Remembering Nisargadatta Maharaj

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Harriet: From what you are saying, I get the feeling that Maharaj had a great respect for the foreigners who came because they came looking for the truth about themselves, not for some palliative, a practice or belief that would keep them happy for a while.

David: In one sense, yes. I did hear him say a couple of times that he respected the fact that we had all abandoned our lives in the West in order to come to India in search of liberation, but that didn't mean that in practice he treated us respectfully. We all got shouted at on various occasions, and we all got told off from time to time because of things we did or said. We were all a little fearful of him because we never knew when the next eruption would come. We had all come to have the dirt beaten out of us, in the same way that the dhobis clean clothes by smashing them on rocks. Maharaj smashed our egos, our minds and our concepts on the immovable rock of the Self because he knew that in most cases that was the only way to help us.

I told you a few minutes ago that Maharaj discounted all theories of reincarnation, but he did tell one story that possibly indicated that we had all been searching for God in India before.

'At the end of the *Ramayana*,' he said, 'all the animals who had helped Ram to win the war were given rewards. The monkeys were all told that they could go to a monkey heaven. Now, what is heaven to a monkey? Vast quantities of food, lots of fighting, and limitless sex. So, all the monkeys were reborn as human beings in the West in the twentieth century to experience their idea of "heaven". After some time, though, they all began to get bored of all this excess. One by one, they all started coming back to India because they wanted to find Ram and be with him again.'

Harriet: What did he shout at you for?

David: I remember one time trying to talk to him about effort. I think I was talking about the various efforts I had made to realise the Self. This was soon after I started going to see him. I didn't realise at the time that the word 'effort' was a no-no in that room. He really didn't like anyone using it. The idea that there was a person who did something to achieve some spiritual state was a complete anathema to him. He seemed to feel that it showed a complete lack of understanding of his teachings.

When he started to get annoyed with me for using the word, I just ploughed ahead, thinking innocently that he probably hadn't understood what I was trying to say. The more I attempted to describe my 'efforts' and justify them, the more annoyed he got with me. I ended up getting an earful about my wrong understanding and wrong attitude. I was quite taken aback at the time. I had never come across a teacher before who disparaged hard work and effort on the spiritual path. On the contrary, all the others I had encountered had heartily endorsed such activities. That's why I initially thought that there must have been some kind of misunderstanding. I realised later that when Maharaj spoke, he wasn't giving instructions that he wanted you to act on. He was simply telling you who and what you were. You were supposed to understand and experience what he was talking about, not turn it into a practice. Making a practice out of it simply confirmed for him that you hadn't really understood what he was saying. One question that always rubbed him up the wrong way was, 'Yes, Maharaj, I understand intellectually what you are saying, but what do I do to actually experience it?' If you said that, you didn't understand him, or what he was trying to do, at all.

I have an embarrassing memory of another time he got angry with me. One afternoon my attention was wandering and my mind was embroiled in some larger-than-life ego fantasy. I was off in my own little world, not really listening to what was going on. Maharaj stopped the answer he was giving to someone else, apparently in mid-sentence, turned to me and started shouting at me, demanding to know whether I was listening and understanding what he was saying. I did a little prostration as an apology and put my attention back on what he was talking about. Afterwards, a few people wanted to know why he had suddenly launched such a ferocious attack on me. So far as they were concerned I was just sitting there minding my own business. I definitely deserved that one, though. In retrospect I can say that it increased both my attentiveness and my faith in him. When you know that the teacher in front of you is continuously monitoring all your thoughts and feelings, it makes you clean up your mental act quite a bit.

On another occasion Maharaj got angry with me simply because one of the translators didn't understand what I had asked. I said that the previous day he had said one thing, whereas this morning he was saying what appeared to be the exact opposite. The translator somehow assumed I was criticising the quality of the translation on the previous day and passed on my critique to Maharaj. He really got angry with me over that, but that one just bounced off me because I realised immediately that it was all due to a misunderstanding. Someone eventually told the translator what I had actually said, and he apologized for all the trouble his comments had caused.

Harriet: Were the translators all good? I have been told that some were better than others.

David: Yes, there were good ones and not-so-good ones. I think everyone knew who was good and who was not, but that didn't result in the good ones being called on to do the work if they happened to be there. There seemed to be some process of seniority at work. The translators who had been there the longest were called on first, irrespective of ability, and those who might have done a better job would have to wait until these more senior devotees were

absent. When I first went a man called Sapre did most of the morning translations. He was very fluent and seemed to have a good grasp of Maharaj's teachings, but he interpolated a lot of his own stuff in his English answers. Two sentences from Maharaj might turn into a two-minute speech from Sapre. Even though most of us didn't know any Marathi, we knew that he must be making up a lot of his stuff simply because he was talking for so long. Several people complained to Maharaj about this, but he always supported Sapre and generally got angry with the people who complained about him. That was the cause of the outburst I just mentioned. Maharaj thought I was yet another person complaining about Sapre's translations.

Mullarpattan was next down the pecking order. I liked him because he was very literal. Possibly not quite as fluent as some of the others, but he scored points with me because he stuck to the script both ways. I once asked Maharaj a question through him, and when the answer came back, it made absolutely no sense at all. Mullarpattan, though, was beaming at me as if he had just delivered some great pearl of wisdom.

I thought about it again and it still made no sense, so I said, somewhat apologetically, 'I don't understand any of that answer. It doesn't make any sense to me at all.'

'I know,' replied Mullarpattan, 'it didn't make any sense to me either. But that's what Maharaj said and that's what I translated.'

Somewhat relieved, I asked him to tell Maharaj that neither of us had understood what he had said and requested him to explain the topic a little differently. Then we got on with the conversation.

I really respected Mullarpattan for this. He didn't try to put some sense into the answer, and he didn't tell Maharaj that his answer didn't make any sense. He just translated the words for me in a literal way because those were the words that Maharaj had intended me to hear.

Right at the bottom, in terms of seniority anyway, was Ramesh Balsekar. He didn't come to see Maharaj until some point in 1978. I thought this was unfortunate because in my opinion, and in the opinion of many of the other foreigners there, he was by far the most skilful of all the translators. He had a good understanding of the way foreign minds worked and expressed themselves, and a good enough intellect and memory to remember and translate a five-minute rambling monologue from a visitor. He was so obviously the best, many of us would wait until it was his turn to translate. That meant there were occasionally some long, embarrassing silences when the other translators were on duty. Everyone was waiting for them to be absent so that Balsekar could translate for them.

All the translators had their own distinctive style and their own distinctive phrases. When I read Jean Dunne's books in the 1980s I was transported back into Maharaj's room because I would be hearing the words, not just reading them. I would look at a couple of lines, recognise Mullarpattan's style, or whoever else it happened to be, and from then on I would hear the words in my mind as if they were coming out of the translator's mouths.

Harriet: So all these books are simply a transcription of what the interpreter said on the day of the talk. They are not translations of the original Marathi?

David: I don't know about the other books, but I know that's what

Jean did. For a couple of weeks I spent the afternoon in her flat, which was near Chowpatthy Beach. On that particular visit, my own place was too far away, so I just slept there at night. Jean was doing transcriptions for *Seeds of Consciousness* at the time and she would occasionally ask for my help in understanding difficult words on the tape, or she would ask for an opinion on whether a particular dialogue was worth including. I know from watching her work and from reading her books later that she was working with the interpreter's words only.

Harriet: Did she ask Maharaj if she could do this work? How did she get this job?

David: From what I remember, it was the other way round. He asked her to start doing the work. This created a bit of resentment amongst some of the Marathi devotees, some of whom thought they had the rights to Maharaj's words. There was an organisation, a Kendra that had been set up in his name to promote him and his teachings, and certain members seemed a bit miffed that they had been left out of this decision. One of them came to the morning session and actually said to Maharaj that he (i.e. the visitor) alone had the right to publish Maharaj's words because he was the person in the Kendra who was responsible for such things. I thought that this was an absurd position to take: if you set up an organization to promote the teachings of your Guru, and your Guru then appoints someone to bring out a book of his teachings, the organization should try to help not hinder the publication. Maharaj saw things the same way.

In his usual blunt way he said, 'I decide who publishes my teachings, not you. It's nothing to do with you. I have appointed this woman to do the job and you have no authority to veto that decision.'

The man left and I never saw him again.

Harriet: Did you never feel tempted to write about Maharaj yourself? You seem to have written about all the other teachers you have been with.

David: On one of my early visits Maharaj asked me what work I did at Ramanasramam. I told him that I looked after the ashram's library and that I also did some book reviewing for the ashram's magazine.

He gave me a strong look and said, 'Why don't you write about the teachings?'

I remember being a little surprised at the time because at that point of my life I hadn't written a single word about Ramana Maharshi or any other teacher. And what is more, I had never felt any interest or inclination in doing so. Maharaj was the first person to tell me that this was what I should be doing with my life.

As for writing about Maharaj, the opportunity never really arose. In the years that I was visiting him, I wasn't doing any writing at all, and in the 80s and 90s I had lots of other projects and topics to occupy myself with.

Harriet: You have some good stories to tell, and some interesting interpretations of what you think Maharaj was trying to do with people. I am finding all this interesting, and I am sure other people would if you took the trouble to write it down.

David: Yes, as I have been talking about all these things today, a part of me has been saying, 'You should write this down'. The

feeling has been growing as I have talking to you. After you leave, maybe I will start and try to see how much I can remember.

Harriet: I suppose we should have talked about this much earlier, but how did you first come to hear of Maharaj, and what initially attracted you to him?

David: Sometime in 1977 I gave a book, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, by Chogyam Trungpa, to a friend of mine, Murray Feldman, and said that he would probably enjoy reading it. I knew he had had a background in Buddhism and had done some Tibetan practices, so I assumed he would like it. He responded by giving me a copy of *I am That*, saying that he was sure that I would enjoy it. Murray had known about Maharaj for years and had even been to see him when Maurice Frydman was a regular visitor. I remember Murray's vivid description of the two of them together: two old men having intensely animated discussions during which they would both get so heated and excited, they would be having nose-to-nose arguments, with lots of raised voices and arm waving. He had no idea what they were talking about, but he could feel the passion from both sides. In those days, if you visited Maharaj, you were likely to be the only person there. You would get a cup of tea and a very serious one-on-one discussion, with no one else present.

A few years later I heard Maharaj say, 'I used to have a quiet life, but *I am That* has turned my house into a railway station platform'.

Anyway, back to the story. I am digressing before I have even started. I went through the book and I have to admit that I had some resistance to many of the things Maharaj said. I was living at Ramanasramam at the time and practicing Bhagavan's teachings. There were clear similarities between what Maharaj was saying and what Bhagavan had taught, but I kept tripping over the dissimilarities: statements that the 'I am' was not ultimately real, for example. However, the book slowly grew on me, and by the end I was hooked. In retrospect I think I would say that the power that was inherent in the words somehow overcame my intellectual resistance to some of the ideas.

I went back to the book again and again. It seemed to draw me to itself, but whenever I picked it up, I found I couldn't read more than a few pages at a time. It was not that I found it boring, or that I disagreed with what it was saying. Rather, there was a feeling of satisfied satiation whenever I went through a few paragraphs. I would put the book down and let the words roll around inside me for a while. I wasn't thinking about them or trying to understand them or wondering if I agreed with them. The words were just there, at the forefront of my consciousness, demanding an intense attention.

I think that it was the words and the teachings that initially fascinated me rather than the man himself because in the first few weeks after I read the book I don't recollect that I had a very strong urge to go to see him. However, all that changed when some of my friends and acquaintances started going to Bombay to sit with him. All of them, without exception, came back with glowing reports. And it wasn't just their reports that impressed me. Some of them came back looking absolutely transfigured. I remember an American woman called Pat who reappeared radiant, glowing with some inner light, after just a two-week visit.

Papaji used to tell a story about a German girl who went back to

Germany and was met by her boyfriend at the airport. The boyfriend, who had never met Papaji and who had never been to India, prostrated full length on the airport floor at her feet.

He told her afterwards, 'I couldn't help myself. You had undergone such an obvious illuminating transformation, I felt compelled to do it.'

I know how he felt. I never prostrated to any of the people who had come back from Bombay, but I could recognise the radical transformations that many of them had undergone. Even so, I think it was several months before I decided to go and see for myself what was going on in Bombay.

Harriet: What took so long? What made you wait?

David: Something has just surfaced in my memory, something I haven't thought about for years. After reading *I am That* a few times, I developed a great faith in Maharaj's state and power. I knew he was the real thing. I knew that if I went to see him I would accept any advice that he gave me. Around that time I heard reports that a couple of foreigners I knew had been to see him, and that he had advised them both to go back to their respective countries. This alarmed me a bit. I was very attached to being in Tiruvannamalai, and I definitely didn't want to go back to the West. Something inside me knew that if Maharaj told me to go back to England, I would go. I didn't want to leave India, so I held off going to see him for a few months.

There was another unresolved issue. I wasn't sure at that point whether or not I needed a human Guru. The Ramanasramam party line has always been that Bhagavan can be the Guru for everyone, even people who never met him while he was alive. I seem to remember having a knowledge of all the places in the Ramanasramam books and in *I am That* where the subject of Gurus came up. I would read them quite often, without ever coming to a final conclusion about whether I needed a human Guru or not.

Harriet: So what made you finally overcome your resistance to going to Bombay?

David: An Australian woman, who had been before, suggested we go, and I agreed. I always knew I would go sooner or later. I just needed a push to get me going, and this invitation was it. I am trying to remember when it was. I think it was the middle of 1978, but I can't be more accurate than that.

Harriet: What were your first impressions? What happened when you arrived?

David: I remember sitting in his room, waiting for him to come upstairs. I was very nervous and apprehensive, but I can't remember why. I recollect trying to start a conversation with the man sitting next to me, but he asked me to be quiet so that he could meditate.

Maharaj came in and a few minutes later I found myself sitting in front of him, telling him who I was and why I had come. It was an afternoon session and not many people were there. Since I was the only new person present, he called me up to find out who I was and what I wanted.

I explained that I had come from Ramanasramam, that I had spent two years there, and that I had been practising Bhagavan's teachings on self-enquiry fairly intensively. At this period of my life I often used to meditate eight hours a day, although by the time I met Maharaj this was beginning to tail off a bit.

Maharaj eventually asked me if I had any questions and I

replied, 'Not now. I just want to sit and listen to you for a while.'

He accepted this and allowed me to disappear to the back of the room. I should say at this point that I had already felt the power and the peace of his presence in the room. It was something very tangible.

Harriet: Did you go there with questions that you wanted to ask him? Was there anything that you wanted to talk to him about?

David: I really can't remember. I knew I would end up talking to him, but I didn't have any particular burning question.

Harriet: How long did it take for you to summon up the courage to start a dialogue with him?

David: I think it was the next day, in the afternoon session. That means I must have sat through two full sessions, just listening to what other people had to say, and to what Maharaj had to say to them.

Eventually, when there was a lull in the conversation I asked, 'I have been doing self-enquiry, trying to keep attention on the inner feeling of "I", for several years, but no matter how intensively I try to do it, I don't find that my attention stays on the "I" for more than a few seconds. There doesn't seem to be an improvement in my ability to keep my attention on this inner feeling of "I". Do the periods of being aware of the "I" have to get longer and longer until they become more or less continuous?'

'No,' he replied, 'just having the strong urge to seek this "I" and investigate it is enough. Don't worry about how well or how long you are holding onto it. The strong desire to know the "I" will keep taking you back to it when your attention strays. If something is important to you, it keeps coming up in your mind. If knowing the "I" is important to you, you will find yourself going back to it again and again.'

After that I think I talked to him almost every day, mostly about various aspects of his teachings on consciousness. He seemed to encourage questions from me, and I always enjoyed quizzing him. However, the exact details of the questions and answers seem to have slipped through the cracks of my memory.

Next: [Let me redress the balance by telling one very long and very lovely story.](#)

Remembering Nisargadatta Maharaj

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[At the end of that period the translator begin to explain what she had said.](#)

[We all sat there, absolutely dumbfounded.](#)

[So you would say that Maharaj was looking after the welfare of devotees, in the same way that other great Gurus were?](#)

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Harriet: All this talk about Ramana Maharshi has reminded me of something else that I wanted to ask. We started off this afternoon with a question about why Maharaj isn't the topic of memoirs, at least book length ones. A few people have written short accounts, but I have never come across a full-length book about living with him. Many of the Ramana Maharshi books are filled with stories of miraculous events that seemed to be taking place around him. Many of his devotees tell stories of how faith in Bhagavan changed their lives or somehow, in an improbable way, transformed their destiny. I know that Bhagavan himself disowned all personal responsibility for these events, but that didn't stop people writing them down and attributing them to Bhagavan's grace.

I suppose my question is, did similar things happen around Maharaj, and if they did, why did no one ever bother to write them down?

David: I don't know how common such events were, but I know that they did happen. And if similar things did happen to other people, I really don't know why those who know about these events don't want to write them down.

Let me redress the balance by telling one very long and very lovely story.

At some point in the late 1970s I was asked to take a South American woman called Anna-Marie to Bombay and look after her because she hardly spoke a word of English. Her native language was Spanish and I think she lived in Venezuela, but I have a vague memory that this wasn't her nationality. I was planning to go to Bombay anyway to see Maharaj, so I agreed to take her and look after her. Very early on in our journey we were still in Madras I realised that I had been given a bit of a basket case to look after. Anna-Marie was completely incapable of looking after herself, and was incredibly forgetful. Before we had even managed to get on the train to Bombay, she managed to lose all her money and her passport. By retracing our steps, we eventually tracked them down to a bookstore near the station. Miraculously, the manager had found the purse and had kept it with him in case we came back looking for it.

A few hours into our train journey from Madras to Bombay Anna-Marie went to the bathroom. On Indian trains that means a squat toilet which is just a hole in the floor with footrests on either side of it. Anna-Marie was sitting there, doing her business, when the train jolted on the tracks. Her glasses fell off and disappeared down the hole in the floor. It turned out to be her only pair, and without them she was more or less blind. I realised this later in the day when we stopped at a station further down the line. Anna-Marie was standing on the platform when the train started to pull out of the station. She made no move to get on. When I realised what was happening, I jumped off and pushed her onto the moving train. I had already realised that she was having trouble seeing things, but I didn't realise how bad things really were until I discovered that she couldn't see a moving train, with about twenty-five carriages, that was about ten feet in front of her. I knew that my first priority, once we got to Bombay, would be to get her a new pair of glasses. I remembered that there was an optician quite near to Maharaj's house. I had noticed it on previous trips while I was waiting to catch a bus to go downtown.

Early the next morning, as soon as the shop opened, I took her in to get her eyes tested and to get her some glasses. The test took a long time, partly because of Anna-Marie's deficiency in English, and partly because the optician couldn't work out what her prescription was.

After about half an hour he came out and said, 'She needs to go to a specialist eye hospital. I can't find out with my instruments here what her prescription might be. There is something seriously wrong with her eyes, but I don't know what it is. Take her to "Such and Such" Eye Hospital.'

Whatever the name was, I had never heard of it. He started to give me directions, but since I didn't know Bombay, I wasn't able to follow them. This was when the first 'miracle' of the day happened. It was to be the first of many.

'Don't worry,' said the optician, 'I'll take you there myself.'

He closed his store there were no assistants to man the counter while we were away and we set off on a walk across Bombay. We must have walked over a mile before we finally arrived at the hospital. He took us to the office of an eye surgeon he knew there and explained that his instruments were not sophisticated enough to work out what was wrong with Anna-Marie's eyes. He then left us and went back to his store. I have encountered many acts of kindness in all the years I have been in India, but I still marvel at this shop owner who closed down his store for a couple of hours and then went on a two-mile round-trip walk just to help us out.

The eye surgeon set to work on Anna-Marie's eyes. Even he was impressed by how complicated her eyes were. He tried her out on several machines and gadgets, but like the optician before him, he failed to come up with a prescription.

'What is wrong with this woman?' he asked. 'How did she end up with eyes like these?'

I shrugged my shoulders. 'I have no idea. I barely know her and she hardly speaks any English.'

We went off to a different part of the hospital that, to my untrained eye, seemed to have bigger and fancier machines. This new combination of equipment finally came up with a reading for

Anna-Marie. Our curiosity had been piqued by this long complicated process so we tried through sign language and the few English words she knew to discover how Anna-Marie's eyes had come to be so peculiar. After a few false starts she realised what we were asking. It turned out that she had fallen out of a building in South America and had landed on her face. Having watched her behaviour and activities in the previous two days, I found this to be an entirely believable scenario. I don't think I have ever come across someone who was so accident-prone.

Her eyes had been damaged in the fall and had been stitched in various places. As a result of this surgery there were places on the eyeball that had a very eccentric curvature. This accounted for the first optician's inability to work out what she needed. Even the big eye hospital took almost an hour to figure out what she needed.

I got to talking to the eye surgeon and discovered that we had a mutual acquaintance in Tiruvannamalai. In fact, he knew quite a few of Bhagavan's devotees. Like the optician before him, he decided to take us under his wing.

'Where will you go to get this prescription fulfilled?' he asked.

'Well, the first man we went to, the one who brought us here, was very helpful to us. I would like to go back to him to give him the business since he was so kind to us.'

'No, no,' said the surgeon, 'he only has a little shop. He won't be able to fulfill an order like this. It is too complicated. I will take you to the biggest optician in Bombay.'

He too closed down his office and took us on another trip across Bombay. As we walked through the front door of the store he was taking us to, everyone jumped to attention. He was clearly a very respected figure in the eye world.

'These are my friends,' he announced, waving at us. 'They have a difficult prescription to fulfill. Please do it as quickly as possible because this woman can't see anything without glasses. She is virtually blind.'

He left us in the hands of the manager of the store and went back to the hospital. The manager's big, beaming smile lasted as long as it took him to read the prescription. He put it down on the counter and started to talk to us very apologetically.

'Normally, we keep lenses for every possible prescription here in the store. We have a huge turnover, so we can afford to make and keep lenses that we have no customers for. Sooner or later somebody will come and buy them, and everyone appreciates the fact that they can get what they want on the spot, without having to wait for anything to be made. But this prescription is such a ridiculous combination, no one would ever think of making it or keeping it. Until I saw it myself I would have guessed that nobody in the world had eyes that corresponded with these numbers. We will have to make a special order and that will take a long time because the glass grinders are out on strike at the moment. Even if they go back to work, it will probably be weeks before we can get them to make an order like this because they already have a lot of pending orders. I'm sorry, I can't help you, and nobody else in the city will be able to help you either because this prescription is just too unusual for anyone to stock.'

This apology took about five minutes to deliver. While it was going on one of the boys from the store, who obviously didn't know any English, picked up the paper and went to the storeroom

to look for the lenses. That was his job: to pick up the prescriptions from the front office and find the corresponding lenses in the storeroom. Just as the manager was coming to his conclusion, the boy reappeared with two lenses that exactly corresponded to the numbers on the prescription. The manager was absolutely flabbergasted.

'This is not possible,' he kept saying. 'No one would make and keep lenses like these.'

He finally adjusted the impossibility by saying that someone must have ordered these lenses long ago and had forgotten to collect them.

Because we had been declared friends of the great and famous eye surgeon we had only known him for about two hours we were given a massive discount and about half an hour later Anna-Marie walked out of the store wearing what I was absolutely convinced was the only pair of spectacles on planet earth that she could actually see the world through. Now, was there a miracle in there, or were we just the fortunate recipients of an amazingly serendipitous sequence of events?

I decided to pick the initial optician who agrees to close down his store and take us to the one eye surgeon in town who happens to be interested in Ramana, who then takes us, against my wishes, to the only store in Bombay where lenses can be found for Anna-Marie. I am a bit of a sceptic, and in my jaundiced opinion there are too many good things in that sequence to be attributed to chance alone.

My own belief is that when you go to the Guru, the power of that Guru takes care of any physical problems that may arise. He doesn't do it knowingly; there is just an aura around him that takes care of all these problems. We never even told Maharaj about Anna-Marie's glasses. When we set off that morning, I just assumed that she had fairly normal eyes and that within half an hour or so we would be able to buy some glasses that would bring the world into focus.

This was not the end of the story. I told you it was a long one. Anna-Marie was sitting with Maharaj every day for about a week, but of course, she couldn't understand a word of what was going on. There was no one there who spoke Spanish. Then, one morning, she appeared very red-eyed and I asked her what was the matter.

'I was up all night,' she said, in very broken English, 'praying for a Spanish translator to come today. There is something I have to tell Maharaj, and I need a translator to do it.'

Later that morning, as we were all sitting in a café on Grant Road in the interval between the end of the *bhajans* and the beginning of the question-and-answer session, we noticed a new foreign face at an adjoining table a woman who was reading a copy of *I am That*. We introduced ourselves and discovered that, surprise, surprise, she was a professional Spanish-English translator who worked in Bombay and who had recently come across Maharaj's teachings. She had decided in a general sort of way to come and visit Maharaj, but only that morning did her general urge translate into positive action. Anna-Marie, of course, was over the moon. The translator she had spent all night praying for had miraculously manifested on the next table to her about fifteen minutes before the question-and-answer session started.

We all went back to Maharaj's room, curious to find out what Anna-Marie wanted to say to him. This is more or less what she had to say via the translator.

I was living in Venezuela when I had a dream of a mountain and two men. I found out soon afterwards that one of the two men was Ramakrishna, but for a long time I didn't know who the other man was or what the mountain might be. Then, last year, I saw a photo of Ramana Maharshi and realised that this was the second man in the dream. When I did some research to find out more about him, I soon realised that the mountain in the dream was Arunachala. In the dream Ramana Maharshi looked at me in a very special way and transmitted a knowledge of his teachings to me. He didn't do it verbally. He just looked at me, and as he was looking, I just felt that he was filling me up with an understanding of his teachings, a knowledge that I could articulate quite clearly, even though no words had passed between us. I knew that I had to come to India to find out more about him. I persuaded a friend of mine to bring me here, even though I knew that Ramana Maharshi was no longer alive. I knew I had some business here and something was compelling me to come. While I was in Tiruvannamalai I heard about you, and I knew that I had to come and see you as well. That same compulsion that made me come to India to find out about Ramana Maharshi has made me come here as well. I don't know what it is, but I knew that I had to come.'

Maharaj interceded at this point: 'What were the teachings that were transmitted to you in the dream? What did Ramana Maharshi tell you as he was revealing his teachings in silence?'

Anna-Marie talked in Spanish for about five minutes without any translation being given by the interpreter. At the end of that period the translator began to explain what she had said. We all sat there, absolutely dumbfounded. She gave a perfect and fluent five-minute summary of Maharaj's teachings. They were quite clearly not Ramana's teachings but Maharaj's, and this woman was giving a wonderful presentation of them. I think it was one of the best five-minute summaries of the teachings I had ever heard. And remember, this was from a woman who was on her first visit, someone who had had very little acquaintance with Maharaj's teachings before coming there that day.

Maharaj seemed to be as impressed as everyone else there. He stood up, took Anna-Marie downstairs and initiated her into the mantra of his lineage by writing it on her tongue with his finger. I mentioned earlier that he would volunteer to give out the mantra if anybody wanted it. If someone asked for it, he would ordinarily whisper it in his or her ear. This is the only case I know in which he gave out the mantra without being first asked, and it is the only instance I know of in which he wrote it with his finger on a devotee's tongue. What does all this mean? I have absolutely no idea. I have long since given up trying to guess or rationalise why Gurus do the things they do.

Harriet: That's a great story! So you would say that Maharaj was looking after the welfare of devotees, in the same way that other great Gurus were?

David: I would answer a conditional 'yes' to that question. 'Yes' because it is the nature of enlightened beings to be like this — they don't have any choice in the matter because these things go on around them automatically. However, on a more superficial level

the answer might be 'no'. If people took their personal problems to him, he might get angry and say that it was none of his business. He didn't perceive himself as someone who dealt with individual people who had problems. I saw several people go to him to tell him that they had had all their money or their passport stolen, and his standard response was to tell them off for being careless. I told him once that I was worried about how much I was sleeping. At the time, though, I did think this was a legitimate spiritual question because I had read many teachers who had said that it was bad to sleep a lot.

His answer, though, was 'Why are you bringing your medical problems to me? If you think it is a problem, go and see a doctor.'

In that particular case his advice turned out to be perfectly correct. I discovered later that I was suffering from a major infestation of hookworm, almost certainly as a result of walking around India for years with no footwear. Hookworms eat red blood cells and if they get out of control, they eat more than the body can produce. Eventually, you get very anaemic, which means feeling tired and sleepy all the time. So, in this particular case, what appeared to be a cranky, dismissive answer was the most useful thing he could say. I would say that the Self put the right words into his mouth at the right moment, but at the time neither of us knew just how right they were.

Despite his generally irritable response when people went to him for personal help, I think he was fully aware that he was looking after all his devotees' well being, even though it may not have looked that way a lot of the time.

Harriet: Again, can you give me an example of this, or is this just guesswork?

David: I remember a large fat man from Madras who came to see Maharaj with what he said was a problem: 'I have been doing *japa* for many years and I have acquired *siddhis* as a result. If I am very pleased with someone, very good things happen to him or her automatically. I don't think about it or do anything. It just happens by itself. But if I get angry with someone, the opposite happens. Very bad things happen, and sometimes the person even dies. How can I stop these things from happening?'

Maharaj told him, 'All these *siddhis* have come on account of your *japa*. If you stop doing the *japa*, the *siddhis* will also stop.'

'I don't think I can do that,' replied the man. 'The *japa* has taken me over so completely, it is no longer voluntary. It just happens by itself whether I want it to or not.'

Maharaj repeated his advice, but the man wasn't interested in carrying it out. He looked very pleased with himself and I got the feeling that he had just come there to show off his accomplishments. My opinion was confirmed when he announced that he was now willing to answer questions from anyone in the room. He hadn't come there to receive advice, he had come to give it out.

Maharaj asked him to leave and said that if he was really interested in his teachings he could go in the evening to the house of one of his women devotees, a Sanskrit professor who sometimes did translations for him, and she would explain them to him. He was told not to come back to the room. I suspect that Maharaj wanted to keep him away from us because there was something strange and threatening about him. I am not a very psychic kind of

person but I could definitely feel an unpleasant energy coming off this man. It was something that made me feel physically queasy. He really did have an aura of bad energy around him. I checked with some of the other people afterwards, and some of them had felt the same way.

All this took place in a morning session. That evening the Sanskrit professor showed up an hour late, looking very flustered. Maharaj immediately wanted to know what was going on.

'This man from Madras came to my house and I couldn't get him to leave. I told him that it was time for me to come here, but he wouldn't get up and go. I didn't really want to force him to go. He might have got angry with me, and then I might have died.'

Maharaj appeared to be outraged. He puffed out his chest like a fighting cock going into battle and announced, very angrily, 'No one can harm my devotees. You are under my protection. This man cannot do you any harm. If he comes to talk to you again, throw him out when it is time for you to come here. Nothing will happen to you.'

This was the only occasion when I heard Maharaj make a strong public declaration that he was protecting and looking after his devotees.

Maharaj himself had no fear of people like this. He told us once about a yogi who had come to his beedi shop to test his powers. This yogi apparently had many *siddhis* and he came to see if Maharaj, of whom he had heard great things, could match him. Maharaj just went about his business in the shop and refused all challenges to show off what he could do. Eventually, in an attempt to provoke him into doing something, the yogi said that he would curse him and make something very bad happen to him.

Maharaj apparently looked at him with complete unconcern and said, 'You may be able to pull down a thousand suns from the sky, but you can't harm me and you don't impress me. Now go away.'

Next: I think this whole episode was orchestrated by the power that looks after the affairs of devotees who have a strong urge to be with a Guru.

Remembering Nisargadatta Maharaj

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Harriet: What about you? Were there any instances when you felt that he was looking after you, taking care of your physical well being as well as your spiritual health?

David: There is nothing remotely as spectacular as Anna-Marie's visit, but I can tell you the story of one trip I made to see him. There are a few incidents on the way that are nothing to do with what you are asking, but by the time I get to the end, you will realise what it is all about.

In 1980 I wanted to see Maharaj but I had no money at all. I couldn't afford the train ticket, and I definitely couldn't afford to stay in Bombay for more than a day or two. I accepted an invitation to give a talk about Bhagavan at a seminar in Delhi on condition that I could come back via Bombay. My train ticket was paid for by the organisers, so that took care of the transport arrangements. My meagre funds would allow me two days in Bombay, so I booked the tickets according. In India you have to book your train tickets at least seven to ten days in advance in order to get the train you want.

I made my speech in Delhi and then took the train to Bombay. On the suburban train that ran from the main Bombay station to Grant Road I had all my money, my passport (actually a temporary travel document that was given to me while I waited for a new passport) and my onward train ticket stolen. It was a classic piece of work. There is always a crush as everyone piles into the carriage at the same time. In the general scrummaging someone managed to slit the bottom of my bag and remove my wallet. My first reaction was actually admiration. It had been such a slick, professional job. The slit was only about half an inch bigger than the size of the wallet, and the whole operation had been in carried out in a couple of seconds while I was trying to ensure that I got onto the train.

Fortunately, my local train ticket was in my shirt pocket. In those days there was a Rs 10 fine (about 20 cents US at today's rate) for ticketless travel, and I wouldn't have been able to pay it if I had been unable to produce a ticket at my destination. When I arrived at Grant Road, I didn't even have that much money to my name. I think I had just over a rupee in loose change in one of my trouser pockets. That constituted my entire worldly wealth. I walked to 10th Lane, Khetwadi, the alley where Maharaj lived and

invested all my change in a cup of tea and a morning newspaper. It was very early in the morning and I knew that it would be a couple of hours before anyone I knew showed up. I didn't want to go in and tell Maharaj that I had been robbed because I had seen how he had reacted to other people in that situation. I was hoping to float a loan from someone I knew and then find a floor to sleep on, because without a passport, I wouldn't be able to check into a hotel.

Jean Dunne showed up around the time I expected and I told her what had happened. I knew her well because she had lived in Ramanasramam for a couple of years before she started to visit Maharaj in Bombay. She lent me a few hundred rupees, which I assumed would be enough to have a couple of days in Bombay and get back to Tiruvannamalai. I planned to go to the train station later that morning and get a new copy of my onward ticket issued. Maharaj, though, had other plans for me.

Someone told him that I had been robbed on the suburban train and I braced myself for the expected lecture. Instead, he was astonishingly sympathetic. He spoke to one of his attendants, a bank officer, and asked him to put me up for the duration of my visit. I ended up in a very nice house in quite a good area of Bombay. Quite a change from the bug-ridden lodges that I usually had to frequent. Later that morning I went to V. T. Station to get a new ticket. Much to my amazement, there was no record of my name on any of the trains that were leaving for Madras. In those days there were no computers; all bookings were made by hand in big ledgers. A very civilised and sympathetic railway official (you don't meet many of them when you are not on Guru business in India!) took a couple of hours off to pore over all the ledgers to find out the details of my ticket. There are about 750 people on each train and I think there were three or four trains leaving for Madras on the day that I planned to leave. After scanning over 2,000 names for me, he regretfully announced that I didn't have a reservation on any of the trains that were leaving that day. I began to suspect that some power wanted me to stay in Bombay because mistakes like this are very rare in the railway booking system. In the twenty-seven years I have been using the trains here, I have never ever arrived at a station and discovered that my booked ticket simply didn't exist. I had no alternative except to go and buy a new ticket, which I did with the funds I had borrowed from Jean. The next train with a vacant berth wasn't leaving for over two weeks, which meant that I had that much time to spend with Maharaj.

I had come with very little money, expecting a two-day flying visit. Instead, courtesy of Maharaj and a mysterious event in the railway booking office, I had a luxurious two-week stay in a devotee's house.

I made my way back to Maharaj's house and found that someone had told him about the talk on Ramana Maharshi's teachings I had given in Delhi a few days earlier. That was something else that I wanted to keep quiet about. Maharaj had strong views on unenlightened people giving public speeches about enlightenment. I had only agreed to do it so that I would have a chance of coming to see him, but I suspected that this wouldn't be a good enough excuse for him.

I discovered that he had found out about the talk because when I walked into his room he called me and asked me to come to the

front of the room. I went up and sat facing him in the place where the questioners would usually sit.

'No, no,' he said, 'sit next to me, facing all the other people.'

My spirits sank. I knew that I wouldn't enjoy whatever he had in mind.

'Look at my little room,' he began. 'Only about thirty people come to listen to hear me speak. But David here has just been giving spiritual talks in Delhi. Hundreds of people apparently came to listen to him, so he must be much better at it than me. So today David will give a talk for us.'

This was worse than anything I could have imagined when he called me up. I tried unsuccessfully to wriggle out of his invitation, but when I realised that he wasn't going to back down, I gave a five-minute summary of the paper I had read out in Delhi. It was about the unity between the practices of surrender and self-enquiry in Bhagavan's teachings. One of the translators asked me to go slowly so that he could give a running translation for Maharaj. Through the duration of the talk Maharaj was glaring at me very intently. I think that he was waiting to pounce on me if I made some comment that he didn't agree with. I made it to the end of my summary without being interrupted by any scathing comments from Maharaj. I thought that this in itself was quite a major accomplishment.

After my conclusion he looked at me and said in a fairly mild tone, 'I can't quarrel with anything you said. Everything you said was correct.'

Then he fired himself up and said very strongly and forcefully, 'But don't go around giving talks about how to get enlightened unless you are in that state yourself. Otherwise, you will end up like that Wolter Keers.'

I have already told you what he thought of Wolter Keers and his teaching activities. That was a fate I was determined to avoid. All this took place twenty-three years ago. I haven't given a public talk since then.

I need to fast forward a bit here and get to the end of the story. I arrived back in Tiruvannamalai more than two weeks later. I had no income, no prospect of receiving any money from anyone, and I had a debt of several hundred rupees that I owed to Jean. I went to work the next morning in the ashram library and found an orange envelope on my desk with my name on it. I opened it and found a bundle of rupee notes inside. I counted them and discovered that it was exactly the same amount that had been stolen from me in Bombay: not a rupee more, not a rupee less. There was no mention of who had put the money there, and no one ever came forward to say that he or she was the person responsible. So far as I was aware, no one in Tiruvannamalai even knew about the theft. I hadn't told anyone, and I had been back in Tiruvannamalai less than twenty-four hours when the envelope appeared.

I think this whole episode was orchestrated by the power that looks after the affairs of devotees who have a strong urge to be with a Guru. This power took me to Bombay, stole my money and ticket, removed all traces of my booking from the railway ledgers, arranged excellent accommodation for me for more than two weeks, brought me back to Tiruvannamalai, where it then returned all my money to me via an anonymous donor.

Harriet: Where did you normally stay when you went to

Bombay? What did other visiting devotees do for accommodation? Where did you all eat and sleep? I ask this because there was no ashram or centre where all of Maharaj's devotees could stay.

David: It depended on how well off you were. Bombay has always been an expensive place to live in. If you didn't have much money, your choice was very restricted. Some of my friends used to stay at a Buddhist ashram, but that involved participating in a lot of their rituals, which was something many of us didn't want to do because some of the timings clashed with Maharaj's sessions. There were some other cheap options that were either a long way away or which also involved participating in some activity you didn't want to, or submitting to strange rules that were not convenient. I avoided all these places and always stayed at a cheap lodge that was about 200 yards from Maharaj's house, on the same alley. It was called the Poornima, and many of us who were short of money ended up there. I seem to remember that it was Rs 22 for a double room, an amazing price for Bombay even in those days. A couple of streets away there was a place that served cheap lunches to local people who were working in the area. It was made of mud and there were no chairs or tables. However, you could get a great lunch there — chapattis, dhal, and vegetables — for Rs 1.40. I can't remember the exchange rate in those days. I think it may have been about twelve rupees to the dollar. That should give you some idea of the prices.

Maharaj would always ask where you were staying when you first went to see him. If you said 'Poornima' he knew you were either short of funds or being very careful about spending them. He clearly approved of people who didn't waste money, and who got good bargains when they went out shopping. He had spent his whole life being a businessman who knew the value of a rupee, and it irked him considerably to see foreigners wasting money or getting cheated.

One morning when I was there visitors were offering flowers and sweets to him. People would bring flowers to decorate the portraits for the Guru *puja* that took place every morning, and some people brought sweets that would be distributed as *prasad* at the end of it. That day, three foreign women were standing in front of him with flowers that had stems, which meant that they were hoping he would put them in the vases that were kept near him. He asked the first one how much she had paid, and when she told him he was shocked. He got angry with her, said that she had been cheated, and refused to accept the flowers. The second woman suffered the same fate. The third woman's flowers were accepted because she had done a little bargaining and had got the price down to a reasonable amount. Devotion didn't seem to be a factor when it came to getting your flowers accepted. The best way to get your flowers in his vase was to bargain ferociously for them and get a price that would satisfy him.

Now the subject of flowers has come up, I have to digress a little mention the *bhajan* and the Guru *puja* that took place between the meditation and the question-and-answer session. It was the only occasion when Maharaj would allow people to garland him. After he had been garlanded, he would stand in the middle of the room, banging cymbals to the tune of the *bhajan* that was being sung. Mostly, his eyes would be closed. At the beginning he would start

off with small finger cymbals one or two inches in diameter. As the *bhajan* hotted up he would move on to bigger and bigger cymbals which would be passed on to him by an attendant. The biggest pair were almost the size of garbage can lids. They were huge and the noise they made was ear-splitting. You could hear them several streets away. When Maharaj moved on to this biggest set of cymbals, he would already be wearing so many garlands, they would be sticking out in front of him, sometimes to a distance of about two feet. It wasn't possible to bang the biggest cymbals without utterly destroying the garlands. Maharaj would bang away with his eyes closed, and every time the cymbals came together petals would fly off in all directions. By the time it was all over, the floor would be covered with fragments of the flowers he had shattered and sprayed all over the room. It was a beautiful sight and I never got tired of watching him smash his cymbals together and spray flowers in all directions.

Let's get back to his parsimonious habits. I stayed at the Poornima on a visit I made in 1979. I was spending two weeks with Maharaj before flying back to England to visit my family for the first time since I had come to India in 1976. My mother had sent me a ticket, feeling, possibly with some reason, that if she didn't pay for my trip, I might never come home again. I had accumulated orders for copies of *I am That* from friends in England. The British price was about ten times the price of the Bombay price, so all the Maharaj devotees I knew in England had put in orders for cheap copies. I appeared in Maharaj's room with this huge pile of books and asked him to sign them all for the people who were waiting for them in England.

He looked at me very suspiciously and said, 'I thought you had no money. How could you afford to buy all these books?'

I explained: 'They are not for me. They are for people in England who don't want to pay the British price. They have sent me money to bring them Indian copies.'

When I told him the retail price in London he was truly horrified.

'Take as many as you can! No one should pay that price for a book!'

He pulled out his pen and happily autographed all the books.

Harriet: Did you carry on going to see him until he passed away? Were you there in the final days?

David: No, and I didn't want to be. I didn't want sit there watching him slowly die. I wanted to keep my memory of a man who was a perpetual dynamo, an amazingly vital centre of force and energy. I knew that he didn't regard himself as the body, but I didn't want to be there, watching the cancer slowly reduce him to an invalid. I can't remember the date of my last visit, but I do remember that he was still talking without much trouble.

I haven't explained how Maharaj kept the traffic flowing through his room. You need to know about this to understand what comes after. Because of the restricted space available, Maharaj would generally only allow people to spend about two weeks with him. New people were coming every day and there simply wasn't enough room for everyone to sit on the floor.

When Maharaj saw that it was getting congested, he would pick out a few of the people who had been there the longest and ask them to leave, saying, 'You can leave now. New people have come

and there is no room.'

The selected people would then have to leave, but if they were still interested, they could come back after another couple of months and put in another two weeks there. That was the system that many of us followed: two weeks there followed by two or more months somewhere else. Usually, when I arrived, I would tell him that I had a return ticket to Madras in two weeks' time. He trusted me to leave on the appointed day.

On my final visit, though, I have a memory that I was trying to stay few days longer than I had originally intended. I do remember that for a couple of days I would sit in a back corner, hoping he wouldn't notice me, because he knew that my time was up. One morning I couldn't get to my corner seat in time because something delayed me. I found myself sitting quite close to him, effectively blocking his view of some of the people who were immediately behind me. I should mention that I am 6'2" and that my back is disproportionately long for my size. I have short legs and a long back, which means that when I sit on the floor with a straight back the top of my head is the same distance from the floor as someone who is about 6'4". Of course, on that particular morning Maharaj wanted to have a conversation with the person who was sitting immediately behind me, someone who was a lot shorter than I was. I tried unsuccessfully to squirm out of the way, and Maharaj tried to peer round me but it was no use because there wasn't any extra floor space for me to manoeuvre in. We were packed in like sardines in a can.

Eventually Maharaj looked at me and said, with some irritation, 'Why are you still sitting here taking up floor space? I can't see the people behind you. You are full of the knowledge. You are so full of the knowledge it is coming out of your ears and making a mess on my carpet. You can go now and make space for other people.'

That was the last time he spoke to me. I took his irascible remarks to be a blessing and a benediction, a sort of graduation certificate. I left that day and never went back.

Over the next few months I kept receiving reports about his failing health but I never felt tempted to go back one more time. That is, until he suddenly appeared in one of my dreams telling me to come and see him. It was such a forceful dream, it woke me up. I lay there in my bed, wondering if it really was him telling me to come, or whether it was just my subconscious manifesting a secret wish to go and see him one more time. I fell asleep without resolving the issue one way or the other.

A few minutes later he reappeared in my next dream, glaring at me: 'I just told you to come. Why didn't you believe me?'

I woke up and knew that he wanted me to come. Maybe he wanted one last chance to assault my stubborn ego. I didn't go and I can't give any satisfactory excuses for my refusal to respond to this dream. This was just before he passed away in 1981. I could give any number of reasons, but none of them rings true to me or satisfies me. When I study my memory of this event, I can't find any excuses that will pass muster in my conscience. I didn't go, and to this day I can't remember what stopped me.

Harriet: Did the dreams continue? Did he ask you to come again?

David: No, it was only on that one night. However, after he did die I started to have vivid and regular dreams in which I was visiting

him in his room. I would go up the steps and find him there, sitting in his usual seat, and giving out teachings in his usual way. My dream logic would try to work out why he was still there, still teaching. In the dream one part of me knew that he had died, but another part was witnessing him still alive, still teaching in his usual corner. In these dreams I would sometimes come to the conclusion that he hadn't really died at all, that he had faked his death, waited until all the crowds had left, and then gone back to teaching with a small group of people who were somehow in on the game. My dream brain invented all kinds of stories such as these, but even in the dreams they never really convinced me. I knew something was wrong, but I couldn't quite figure out what it was.

These dreams went on all through the 1980s and well into the 1990s. The last dream in this sequence was different. I found Maharaj teaching a small group of people inside the main room of the Ramanasramam dispensary. This was unusual because I had never before dreamed of him anywhere outside his room. Also, the people were different. They were not the Indian faces who populated his room in the earlier dreams. They were all foreigners, all people I knew well. This time there was no doubt, no confusion about why or whether he was still alive.

I looked at Maharaj, turned to my friends who were sitting on the floor with him and said, with a great feeling of exaltation, 'See! I told you! He's alive! He didn't die at all! He's still alive!'

The dream ended and I have never dreamt of him again.

Harriet: What did you make of all this? What did it all mean for you?

David: I don't need Freud on this one. He didn't die because he was never born. He is alive as the Self within me. He can't die. He is inside, biding his time, waiting for the words he planted there to destroy me and my little, circumscribed world. I know that he hasn't given up on me, and I also know that one day he will prevail.

Temple Times

[Click here for a Tamil Translation of this article](#)

This is an article I wrote a couple of years ago for an audience that I assumed would know nothing about Ramana Maharshi or Tiruvannamalai. I never got round to publishing it. It covers a period of my life of which I have very fond memories.

In 1976 I traveled overland to India solely to visit the ashram of Ramana Maharshi, a famous saint who had lived, until his passing away in 1950, at the foot of the holy mountain of Arunachala in the southern state of Tamil Nadu. I went there with the intention of staying several months (I am still here twenty-four years later) but on my arrival I discovered that the ashram I had traveled so far to visit only permitted new visitors to stay for three days. When my time was up, I looked around for somewhere else to live. There wasn't much to choose from, so after a couple of hours I settled for a nice furnished room in a house that had about half an acre of tree-filled garden. The rent was (eat your heart out first-world city slickers) sixty-six cents a month, a little pricey for that area at the time, but the privacy and the garden made it worth the extra cash.

After a pleasant year and a half there, when I decided that the rent was making too much of a dent in my meager budget, I took a house-sitting job about a mile away. When the owner came back nine months later I again found myself looking for somewhere to stay. At that time I was feeling the call of the wild. I wanted somewhere remote where I could live and meditate quietly. The place that most attracted me was an abandoned temple, sited on a rocky outcrop at the base of Arunachala. I say it was abandoned because there was no deity there. Apparently, it had been stolen several years before. An empty lotus-shaped plinth marked the spot in the rear of the temple where the statue had once been worshipped. For me it was a case of location, location, location, and never mind the lack of amenities. It had no electricity, no plumbing, no door, the floor was covered with goat turds, the roof leaked (I discovered that later) and when I tried out the floor for size, I found I could only lie down, fully stretched out, if I positioned myself diagonally across the small rectangle that was the only flat space available. What it did have was a superb view across several miles of countryside, spectacular sunsets and an isolation that I thought would enable me to live and meditate in peace.



My passport photo from 1979.

This is the only surviving photo of me from the late 1970s. I stayed in the Kannappa Temple from about October 1977 to March 1978.



Revisiting the Kannappa Temple sometime in 1986. This is more or less how it looked when I moved in.

(Click on image to enlarge)

I engaged a couple a local carpenters to make me a burglar-proof door. Even though I owned virtually nothing worth stealing, I knew that security might be a problem in such an isolated area. All foreigners in rural India are assumed by some sectors of the community to be rich until a looting of their houses can prove otherwise, and even then there will be a deep suspicion that the valuable stuff is stashed elsewhere. A day or so later I moved into what I was already coming to regard as 'my' temple. I had never possessed real estate before. Owning a door in an abandoned shrine didn't exactly make me a member of the landed gentry, but it definitely gave me the feeling that I had moved up into the propertied class.

There is a joke about Boulder (the new-age town in Colorado) that I love. 'How many people from Boulder does it take to change a light bulb?' Answer: 'None. The people there just form a support group entitled "Coping with darkness."' With no possibility to install electricity, I decided to cope with my own darkness by buying a kerosene lamp. I dealt with the absence of a toilet by digging a trench about thirty yards long in a nearby piece of land that had recently been reforested by the government. It was own personal and private contribution to the regeneration of India's forests. Each morning I would squat there, have a shit, and cover it up with soil I had dug out of the trench. The next morning I would move a foot down the line. After a week or so of following this morning ritual, I noticed the undigested tomato seeds I had shat out were germinating in the trench. Three months later I had a line of plants thirty yards long, seedlings at the business end and fruiting plants at the other. I still remember the joy of picking and eating the first tomato off the first plant. It felt so organic, so ethnic.

When it came to water, I felt spoiled for choice. There was a small well about 200 yards away that supplied me with drinking water. A little further away a farmer was irrigating his fields with a diesel pump. I found out his watering times and had my daily bath there under a gushing fountain of water that shot out from his pump house about five feet above the ground. In this part of the world the temperature rarely drops below eighty degrees, even in midwinter, so afternoon cold showers are almost always a pleasure.

An extra five minutes' walk took me to an artificial pond known as Unnamulai Tirtham. This could be translated as 'The holy pond of the woman whose breasts have never been suckled'. The woman is Parvati, the female consort of Siva, who is the principal deity of most people in this area. The mountain of Arunachala, at the foot of which my shrine was located, is held to be a manifestation (not merely a symbol) of Siva Himself, and it is worshipped as such by millions of South Indians. Tirthams, by the way, are man-made structures that are designed to hold water for the use of passing pilgrims. In this part of the world they resemble inverted pyramids, with the steps on all four sides leading down to the water. Unnamulai Tirtham, which was fed and topped up by a seasonal stream that ran off the western slopes of Arunachala, was used both for bathing and for washing clothes. Other tirthams in the area were earmarked for drinking water, although one would need an iron constitution to sample them on a regular basis. They all tend to have a greenish, uninviting tinge.

Unnamulai Tirtham was by far the biggest tirtham in my area. When it filled with winter rains, it was big enough for me to swim eighty-yard laps. I swam there regularly in winter. It was good to keep moving once one immersed oneself in the water because the fresh-water crabs would nibble at any potential meals that hadn't moved for a few seconds. Occasionally I would rest up on a little island, a rocky promontory that jutted out of the water, and admire the view.

Between the steps of the tirtham and the main pilgrim route around the mountain there was a magnificent granite building that was constructed many centuries ago. Once a year the deities in the principal temple of Tiruvannamalai were taken in a ceremonial procession around the eight-mile route that winds around the base of the hill. Every mile or so the procession would stop and the gods would be installed in temporary temples where the local people could come and worship them. This building was one of these temporary temples. Though it was only intended to be used for a few hours every year, it was a huge, imposing edifice. The British monarch has regional palaces that may only be used for a few days each year, but many of them are just as impressive as Buckingham Palace. Here Siva is king, and whenever he chooses to rest on his travels, the accommodation is always five-star.

Across the front entrance of this mantapam (that's what Hindus call these buildings) there was finely chiseled frieze, carved out of local granite, that depicted various characters from the Hindu pantheon. The brick dome that surmounted it was beginning to crack, and the frieze was beginning to detach itself from the main wall. It looked as if it might crash to the ground at any moment, but there is a solidity to the sacred buildings here that can defy centuries of wear and tear. When I last looked at it a few days ago, it was still hanging there, still defying gravity.

Whenever I passed this mantapam I would look inside to check up on some small blue-gray owls that had taken up residence in niches in the wall about twelve feet off the ground. They would perch on the edges of their holes, even in broad daylight, with smug, self-satisfied looks on their faces that seemed to say, 'I can see you but you can't get near me'. I thought they looked cute and cuddly, but I'm sure the local rats and lizards had an entirely different perception.

I did my laundry in Unnamulai Tirtham every couple of days. Afterwards I would spread out my clothes to dry on the sun-warmed granite steps. Some of them seemed to have been made from recycled temple pillars. A few had carvings of couples coupling, writhing together in utterly improbable postures with rapturous expressions on their faces.

My clothes never took more than an hour to dry. While I waited I would watch the world go by. Farmers would bring their cows and buffaloes down a stone-paved ramp on one side of the tirtham and scrub them clean in the shallows. On the opposite side passing pilgrims would bathe and wash the clothes they were wearing. The women had a great technique for drying their six-yard or nine-yard saris. The woman who owned and generally wore the sari would drape the first two or three feet of wet cloth around her body. A second woman would hold the other end and the two of them would walk down the road together with the remaining yards of the wet sari stretched out tautly between them. It was a kind of mobile washing line strung between two walking women. The breeze and the hot sun would dry them in less than a mile.

Good detergent is a bit of a luxury for most Indian women. The vast majority of people here still dislodge the dirt from their clothes by soaking them in water and then repeatedly smashing them on rocks. A small amount of soap may be used, but the pounding is the main cleanser. This technique is a nationwide phenomenon and it apparently prompted Mark Twain, who passed through India about a hundred years ago, to wonder why so many Indians devoted so much time to trying to break rocks with wet rags.

On my way back to my shrine I would draw water from the first well and carry two full buckets home with me. That was more than enough for cooking, drinking and general cleaning. I used a kerosene stove to cook the provisions that I bought in Tiruvannamalai, a town located about four miles away.

About twice a week I would close my shrine and walk barefoot around the mountain, following the same time-honored eight-mile circuit that the gods and the pilgrims took. Marker stones installed by a local emperor five hundred years ago to delineate the route can still occasionally be found by the side of the road. The walk is traditionally done in a clockwise direction, which means the ever-changing profile of the mountain is always on one's right. As I passed through the town of Tiruvannamalai I would buy whatever I needed for the next couple of days and carry it home with me. I loved the walk; I loved the sights and the sounds of rural India and, since I was young, fit and healthy, the four-mile walk home with my shopping never felt like a burden.

The walk around Arunachala generally took me a little over three hours. If I stopped at any of the wayside shrines for a rest or had a drink in one of the many tea shops or coconut stalls that lined the route, I could add another half hour or so to my walk. I was never in any particular hurry. The local scripture that describes the merits to be gained by walking round the mountain declares that one should do the walk slowly, as if one were a ten-month-pregnant queen. Ramana Maharshi, the Hindu saint who drew me to India and brought me to this mountain, sometimes took three days to complete the walk. That was back in the 1920s, when most of the route passed through dense forest. In those days there was always the possibility of encountering a leopard or a panther on the way.

By the 1970s the only predators left on the route were the professional beggars who would tug at one's clothes as one walked along.

The circuit around Arunachala is deemed to be holy ground. Everyone walks the route without footwear, but this is not as tough as it sounds. Most westerners, who only ever walk without footwear on the beach, complete the route and experience nothing more than a mild soreness. If they do it again a couple of days later, usually there are no after-effects at all.

I abandoned footwear within days of arriving in Tiruvannamalai. I kept a pair of sandals handy for my rare visits to Madras, but in my first few years in India I doubt that I had anything on my feet for more than two days a year. Freed from the binding constraints of shoes and boots, my feet slowly expanded sideways. When I finally decided to wear shoes again (sometime in the 1980s, I think) I discovered that my width measurement was two sizes bigger than the length.

I also abandoned trousers. Most men in rural South India wear a dhoti, a single piece of cloth about five feet long that is worn as a wrap-around skirt. By the time I had lived in India for a year, I had given away all my old western clothes. My standard outfit was a white dhoti, a white banian and no shoes. Banians are Indian undershirts that resemble t-shirts, except that the neckline is a few inches lower. During my first year or so in India I only ever owned one dhoti at a time. When I lived in my sixty-six-cent-a-month room, I would take it off at night, wash it, hang it up to dry and put it on again the next morning. I remember that dhotis, which are made from thin woven cotton, lasted about four or five months. When they started to fray a bit or manifest stubborn stains, I would walk to town and buy another for about fifty cents. The old one would be recycled into handkerchiefs and household rags.

I had an English friend, Michael, who wore the same outfit. We arrived in Tiruvannamalai within months of each other, and both of us stayed for many years. His father had been a Conservative Party MP in Britain and his grandfather was a Scottish laird. Michael's ancestral home was a castle on the Hebridean island of Mull. One evening he came to see me to tell me that he had been asked by his family to go to Bangalore to meet his grandmother who was touring Indian big-game parks. His mother had requested him to wear trousers because she didn't want his grandmother to think he was a gone-native weirdo. Michael had also given all his trousers away, so he came to me in the hope that I might still have a pair somewhere. I didn't, and nor did any of our friends. When I tell this story, few people find it more than mildly amusing, but at the time it provoked hysterical laughter in me. There we were, a group of foreign men, born and bred in the West, and not a single one of us could produce a pair of pants for a special occasion.

As I write this account more than twenty years after the events it describes, I am aware that, though I still live at the foot of Arunachala, nowadays I live in a large house with an acre of luxuriant garden. As I type these words on a \$2,000 laptop, a Mozart opera is playing in the background, a gardener is watering my flowers, and when I look down, I note that I am now wearing trousers. Life has moved on but I cannot say that the objects that have slowly accumulated around me in recent years have made me any happier or more joyful than I was twenty years ago. I elected to

live a life of voluntary simplicity back in the 1970s because I enjoyed living that way. I had a glorious, carefree happiness that wanted nothing and was dependent on nothing. It was not an ascetic, self-denying existence. There was a fullness and a joy in everything I did. I had no material desires that were unfulfilled.

Hindus have a concept they call '*tapas*'. It is generally defined as arduous penance in which one burns off one's spiritual impurities by a physical discomfort that is occasionally extended to voluntary bodily mortification. Many of the Indians I spoke to in the 1970s thought that by living in my tiny, powerless, waterless shrine I was doing severe *tapas* in the hope that I would get enlightened. I wasn't. I was actually enjoying myself, having the time of my life. As I trawl through my memories of this period, every incident I come up with breaks the surface coated with a happy humorous glow. Could I really have been that contented, that unprovokable, or is my memory playing tricks on me? I don't know, but make up your own mind as I share a few memories.

In November the rain came down in sheets. I had a small banyan tree sprouting out of my roof whose roots had pried open several large cracks in the masonry. Rainwater came in through these holes, trickled down my wall and finally came to rest in a large puddle in the lowest corner of the stone floor I was sleeping on. I remember shipping about a bucketful every night during the worst rains. I couldn't catch drips because it was a down-the-wall trickle, not a plop-plop from the ceiling. It was impossible to sleep for more than an hour at a time because, irrespective of where I chose to curl up, that was how long it took for the puddle to spread and soak my bedding. I spent many sleepless nights mopping up the rainwater with a large cloth (doubtless one of my recycled dhotis) and squeezing it into a bucket. Every hour or so I would open the door and tip the water outside. Did this bother me or irritate me in any way? Not that I remember. It was just part of the lifestyle, and one dealt with it in the appropriate way whenever it happened. I remember laughing about it when I told my friends who lived in more sleep-friendly buildings, but I never felt it was spoiling my tenure of the temple or giving me any reason to find another place to live.

My shrine was located on the edge of some fields that were only cultivated when there was a good monsoon. Since none of these farmers had irrigation, they cultivated peanuts, a poor man's crop that can produce a small harvest with minimal fertilizers and a small amount of rain. There were great rains that winter and high expectations of a good crop. As the peanuts began to form under the ground, the farmers sent their children to guard the fields. The tribes of wild macaque monkeys that roamed freely in the area loved to pull out the plants and eat the nuts. It was the children's job to watch the fields and drive away any marauding monkey tribes that passed that way. The obvious lookout post was the roof of my shrine, since it commanded an excellent view of all their fields. However, it was not the ideal spot from which to launch a monkey chase since climbing down the walls of my temple and then down the steps that led up to it was a time-consuming chore that would give the monkeys about two minutes of free peanut-chomping time. So, the children split themselves up, one group in the fields and one group on my roof. It was the job of the group above me to make the maximum amount of noise whenever they sighted monkeys,



[Sri Ramanasramam](#)

*Library which I
ended up running
from 1978 to 1985.*

(Click on image to
enlarge)

primarily to attract the attention of the foot soldiers in the fields but partly also to add moral support to the stone-throwing chase that inevitably ensued. Several times a day I would be jolted out of a peaceful meditation by the sound of several children on the roof, all simultaneously screaming and banging metal dishes. We happily co-existed for about three weeks. When the harvest was gathered in, we sat around and gorged ourselves on freshly picked peanuts.

I was their sole entertainment in the slack periods when there were no monkeys to chase. Put a TV remote control in the hand of an average western ten year old and you will discover, if there are enough channels to surf, that he or she has an attention span of one or two seconds. These children, though, could watch me for hours with unwavering attention and unflagging interest, even when I was doing absolutely nothing. I would meditate for a couple of hours every morning, sitting cross-legged just inside my door. They would observe me intently from a distance and if, after twenty minutes or so, I scratched my nose or moved a foot a little to relieve numbness or joint pain, a shout would go up from outside, 'White man's just scratched his nose!' or 'White man's just moved his foot!' 'Vallikari' or 'White man' is the term Tamils use to describe light-skinned foreigners.

If I did something really spectacular, such as go for a pee in the nearby bushes, this would make their day. The shouts of 'White man's gone for a pee!' would be echoing around the area for up to five minutes. I suspect that a complete report of my nose-scratchings, foot-movings and urinations was passed on to the village adults when the children went home. Many years later I was given a fairly accurate summary of my daily routine in the temple by a man who lived in a nearby village. I am sure I had never seen him before in my life.

I found this constant scrutiny amusing rather than intrusive. When the peanuts were finally harvested and peace and quiet returned to the neighborhood, I found I missed the kids and their random eruptions of noise. I had entertained them well and they in turn had entertained me.

While all this was going on I was doing volunteer work in Ramana Maharshi's ashram, which was about two and a half miles away. Every afternoon I would walk there, look after their small library for two hours, and then walk home. As I review this particular memory, I can only marvel at the slow-paced leisureliness of my routine in those days. I could have bought a bicycle and commuted in a fraction of the time, but I chose not to because I enjoyed the five miles of walking so much.

A friend of mine looked after the library in the morning. When she left for a few weeks, I volunteered to do her shift as well. I took a room in Ramana Maharshi's ashram, thinking I would stay there for a few weeks. It was summer and I didn't see much point in doing the walk from my temple twice a day in the 100-degree heat. My friend never came back, and I ended up staying in the ashram many years. From 1978 to 1985 I immersed myself in the library and worked long hours to revitalize and expand it. The meditating hermit rejoined the work force.



Me, in banian and dhoti, in the summer of 1981 at the opening ceremony of the new Ramanashram library

A couple of months later, when I realised that I wasn't going to be moving back to my temple, I walked out to collect the odds and ends I had left there: a mattress, kitchen utensils, some books, and a rucksack. My spirits sank as I approached the door. It was swinging on its hinges. Someone had forced the lock and removed all my belongings. Or so I thought. When I opened the door, all my possessions were still there. The only thing missing was the rather fancy lock that had been attached to the inside of the door. Whoever had broken in had come to the conclusion that the only thing worth stealing was this lock that had for months and months been guarding and protecting my utterly useless and worthless possessions. I laughed as I visualized how disappointed the thieves must have been as they surveyed their meager haul. A few weeks later more thieves descended and removed the door I had installed. The temple was now restored to its original abandoned state.

I had been told that the temple had originally contained an image of Kannappa, a Tamil saint who became famous more than a thousand years ago by levering out his eyes and offering them to Siva because he was under the impression that Siva's own eyes were damaged. It was a trick, an illusion, staged by Siva to demonstrate to a temple priest just how devoted Kannappa really was. I mention this because there was a strange postscript to my story.

About a year after I moved out of the temple some members of a German charity, Shantimalai Trust, decided to renovate the shrine and reconsecrate it. They were probably planning to have a new image of Kannappa carved and installed, but in the event it was not needed. When news reached Adi-annamalai, a village about two miles away, that restoration work was under way, the thief who had taken the original idol came forward and volunteered to return it. In the years that had passed since he had stolen the statue, his eyesight

had deteriorated to the point where he was almost blind. He knew the story of Kannappa and had attributed his near-blindness to the curse of the saint. I suspect that he wanted to keep what little eyesight he still had. Within weeks of returning the statue, his eyesight began to improve and apparently it eventually returned to normal. Was this merely a bizarre coincidence? Could it have been a psychosomatic disorder that sprang from his sense of guilt, or was it, as the villagers like to maintain, proof that the gods can still bless and curse? I take no sides in this except to add a final footnote to the story. An iconographer who had heard about this village 'miracle' came to inspect the statue and pronounced that it wasn't a Kannappa statue at all. It was another god entirely, one who had no blindness stories in his CV.

My son, the Missionary



My father, Geraldine my elder sister, and my mother, taken sometime in Spain in the late 1980s.

Dutch translation of
this article by
Peter Roosendaal



[Mijn zoon, de
missionaris](#)

A few weeks ago [December, 2000] I traveled to England from India to attend my father's funeral. I had lived in India almost continuously for more than twenty years, mostly in Tiruvannamalai, a medium-sized town at the southern end of the country. I hadn't been back to England much during that period so there were people at the funeral I hadn't seen for thirty years or more: old neighbors, members of dad's church, people he had worked with before he took early retirement about twenty years ago. We peered at each other, calculating who had best weathered the ravages of time. My sister Geraldine started chatting to Mrs Broad, an old neighbor who had worked as an administrator in the school where my father had taught for many years.

'How's David?' enquired Mrs. Broad. 'Is he still a missionary in India?'

Geraldine laughed. 'He isn't a missionary and he never has been. That's just a story mum put out. He lives in India and writes books there, but they are nothing to do with Christianity.'

Mrs Broad heaved a sigh of relief. 'Oh, I'm so glad you told me. It seemed such an improbable thing for him to do.'

The missionary story came into existence in the late 1970s and early 80s, a period of my life when my mother was trying hard to put a gloss on my activities in India. To understand its social necessity you have to know that just about every member of my mother's family was a devout Methodist. The surviving ones still are. On my mother's side an uncle and two first cousins are Methodist ministers. My paternal grandfather was also a Methodist minister and my father served as a lay official in the church for many years. Imagine their collective consternation, then, when I took off to India in my early twenties to live in an Indian ashram and became a devout, practising Hindu.

My mother was a physiotherapist who spent most of her working life treating handicapped children, but if she had ever wanted a second career she could have been a great spin-doctor. She glided over inconvenient facts and always ended up believing

whatever she wanted to believe. Once she had established a particular belief in herself, she could happily promulgate it to others, with great conviction.

After I had been in India a few weeks I sent both my parents a ten-page letter in which I outlined my beliefs and practices. To give them a frame of reference, I threw in a few biblical quotes that seemed relevant to what I was trying to explain.

My mother's rosy response was, 'I'm so glad you still believe in God.'

The essence of good spin-doctoring is to take the offensive, to get your interpretation in first before rumours of damaging alternative versions begin to circulate. My mother took my letter to her local churchwomen's meeting the following week, stood up and read it in its entirety. Because the biblical quotes were familiar and made sense, and because I was quoting them in an approving manner, she somehow managed to convince her audience that I was involved in some esoteric branch of Christianity. The romantic myth of 'My son David, the missionary' was born.

The vedantic ideas I had tried to explain undoubtedly sailed over the heads of everyone present. The facts that stuck were as follows: I came from a good Christian family; I clearly had a passionate belief in God; I had gone to India for religious reasons. It wasn't hard to make a jigsaw of these selected pieces of my narrative and arrange them in a way that made the missionary scenario convincing.

I unwittingly bolstered up this image by sending home a report of how I was dealing with the pervasive poverty I saw all around me in India. I decided early on not to give money to beggars because once they know you are a regular donor, they will all mob you every time you set foot on the road. I didn't have much to give — my total worldly assets at that point were less than \$500 — but my conscience would not permit me to do nothing at all. In the first year I was in India I resolved this dilemma by organizing a large Christmas dinner for the beggars and all the other poor people of my neighborhood. The idea was that I would give all my charity money for the year in one go, in one public function, and for the rest of the year I would give nothing. I borrowed two huge cauldrons from my ashram's kitchen and with the help of a few friends I prepared rice and vegetables for about 150 people. It was a great success. We all ate together in a mango orchard that I had borrowed for the morning.

I included an account of the day's events in a letter I wrote to my parents. My mother, of course, immediately saw an opportunity to add a new entry to my missionary CV. Doing it on Christmas Day, rather than on some Hindu festival, was a major plus point for her. David, the missionary, was now feeding India's starving millions.

The local churchwomen were informed of my Christmas Day treat. They all thought it was a wonderful idea, one that they should support with their funds. A collection was made on my behalf. My mother informed me a week or so later that the churchwomen would sponsor all my future poor-feedings. She even enclosed a cheque for the next one. It would have been churlish to refuse such good-hearted charity, but at the same time I knew that feeding hungry people once in a while wasn't a

productive way of dealing with India's pervasive poverty. I did arrange another feast, since that is what the women had wanted me to do with their money, but when I gave them an account of the next meal, I informed them that their money could be better invested in projects whose benefits would last longer than the amount of time it took for a stomach to empty. I remember citing the following story in my letter:

Around the turn of the twentieth century one of America's famous millionaire businessmen was confronted in his office by an earnest young socialist who tried to persuade him to spread his money around a bit more. The notion of equal shares for all featured prominently in his talk.

After listening for a while the millionaire called his secretary and asked, 'Miss Smith (or whatever her name was), how much am I worth today?'

'About \$300 million,' came the prompt and efficient reply.

'Young man,' said the millionaire, digging into his pockets for some spare change, 'you have completely convinced me. There are two billion people in the world right now, so I calculate your share of my money to be fourteen cents. Here's your money. Now go away and leave me in peace.'

I passed on this story to the churchwomen to demonstrate how even the deepest pockets couldn't make much of a difference to global hunger.

'If you are donating small amounts and you want value for money,' I told them, 'buy schoolbooks and uniforms for the local children here. Children can't attend school in this part of the world unless they buy their own books, and the good schools demand uniforms as well. A child who graduates from school has a good chance of escaping the grind of rural poverty.'

This scheme found favor with the local churchwomen. For the next few years I received regular donations that put many local children through several grades of primary and secondary school. My mother, of course, was delighted. I had graduated from feeding India's starving millions to educating them. The fact that I spent virtually all my time working and meditating in a Hindu ashram didn't make much of a blip on her radar. I was saving the world, or at least one tiny corner of it. She now had ample evidence for her friends and family to back up her initially dubious proposition that I was a missionary.

I went home in 1979 and discovered that my mother had already booked me to speak at a fundraiser in my local church. I tried to get out of it but mum told me that the posters were already up all over the neighborhood. My speech was going to be her vindication.

I didn't want to stand up in church and tell people who had known our family for years that my mother had created a 'David myth' for public consumption. As a compromise I agreed to give a general talk about the problems experienced by poor people in India. I would not describe my charitable activities and I would not ask for money.

It hadn't really been my intention to gross my audience out, but when I began to speak I could tell that many of them were genuinely shocked by some of the stories I told. My father told me afterwards that I had dwelt too much on the squalid side of life. Limbless lepers, mutilated babies who were sold to increase

the earning capacity of professional beggars, open sewers full of human shit: this was not what the good folks of the neighborhood wanted to hear. They wanted a sanitized, well-scrubbed picture of India in which the good guys (the missionaries, no doubt) were triumphing over poverty, adversity and pagan disbelief. I refused to give it to them because in India the good guys are definitely not triumphing. After about fifteen minutes my father started to tap his watch and give me meaningful looks. He wanted me to stop, or move on to more palatable, positive subjects. If there had been a curtain to pull down, I'm sure he would have yanked the cord and pulled it.

A few days later I was given another large check to take back to India. 'The situation is far worse than we thought,' I was told. 'You obviously need more money to deal with it.'

I used this new donation to start a village-level disaster relief fund. If a roof blew off in a storm, or a leg got broken in a farming accident, I would use an intermediary to get money through to the people affected. I didn't want people to know that I was sitting on a pile of give-away money because that would have made my life intolerable. I would have been besieged with supplicants, most of them bringing bogus stories. I explained this aspect of the situation to my mother. Mum the spin doctor sprang into action.

'David is so humble, he doesn't want anyone to know all the good things he is doing.'

My unwanted halo got scrubbed and polished a little bit more.

In the early 1980s both my parents retired and moved to southern Spain. That's where I visited them on my next trip to Europe. One of their neighbors, Frank, was a Scottish industrialist who loved good causes. I seem to remember that he was the Scottish president of Rotary, or some similar organization.

I realised early on in my career,' he told me, 'that I had the Midas touch. Every business I have ever been involved in has made money. I've backed some wacky schemes in my time but they all ended up making me money. I've got far more than I need. Nowadays, I am more interested in giving it away to people who need it.'

His penchant for wacky schemes extended to his charitable causes. He told me about a project to introduce reindeer as draught animals in the Philippines. There was apparently a very confused reindeer called 'Frank' who was pulling a plough in that country.

Mum had obviously primed him with stories of my good deeds. I sat there, waiting for him to reach for his cheque book. Frank had a different agenda, though, one that would also satisfy his other great passion in life. He loved parties and merrymaking in general. He was a genuinely happy man who had a mission in life to make everyone around him as happy as he seemed to be.

'I'll organise a big lunch,' he announced. 'I'll invite everyone I know. I'll charge them all a lot for coming and say that the money is going to good causes in India. At the end of the lunch, I'll give them a sales pitch to see if I can get even more money for you.'

The outdoor 'lunch' lasted from about midday till midnight. Prodigious quantities of food and alcohol were consumed by about a hundred people. No one was charged for any of it and



My father (left) and Frank (right). Spain 1983.



Frank never made his speech. The next day he came to my house.

With a straight but somewhat haggard face told me, 'That was a great fundraiser. Everyone gave money. Look how much we raised.' He handed me a large check. I studied it with disbelief until I realised what had happened. Frank had wanted an excuse to throw a big party and I was it. He had paid for the party himself (that had always been his intention) and I ended up with enough of his spare change to benefit many, many people in India. I thanked him and went along with the game.

At the time this story took place (1983) I had been living in India for seven years. I had spent my time meditating in a famous Hindu ashram, running a religious library and editing a magazine whose readership consisted primarily of devotees of one of Hinduism's greatest modern saints. I had kept my mother abreast of all these developments with regular letters. She could no longer sustain the illusion that I was a Christian, even though she was still proud of the charitable acts I was orchestrating with funds she and her fellow Christians had raised.

There is one conversation from this visit that always sticks in my mind. I was in her bedroom, looking at a photo of me that she had put there.

'I used to keep it in the living room,' she said when she noticed what I was looking at it, 'but I had to move it up here where no one could see it.'

'Why?' I asked. I am no Hollywood hunk, but even so, I couldn't image people recoiling in horror when they saw it.

'Visitor's would say, "Who's that?" and I would say, "That's my son David." Then they would ask, "What does he do?" and I had no idea what to tell them. In the end I moved the photo up here because I found answering questions about you so awkward.'

It was a sad moment for both of us. My mother clearly couldn't relate to what I did. For a few silent moments we stared at each other across a classic mother-son chasm: I wanted understanding for what I did and who I was, and she wanted me to be doing something that she could be proud of when she talked to her friends and neighbors.

'Why don't you tell them I'm a Hindu monk who lives in a monastery in India? That would shut them up, and it's a close approximation of what I really am doing.'

'I couldn't say anything like that. People wouldn't understand.'

What I think she meant was, 'People would think my son was a weirdo, and I can't deal with that.'

She had abandoned her illusions about me but she wasn't yet comfortable with the truth.

Later that day she told me, 'I have kept all your letters in a file. Once in a while I get them all out and go through them. I think I am looking for understanding, but I never get it. I read them again and again, but I never get an overall picture that makes sense to me. I don't know what you are doing or why you are doing it. I can't explain what you do to other people because I can't even explain it to myself. That's why I had to move your photo. It was a challenge I couldn't meet.'

'I don't understand your philosophy or your way of life, but I can recognise happiness when I see it. What you have done has

*Me on the right,
dozing in the sun,
while two of my
parents' friends chat.
Spain 1983.*

completely fulfilled you. I don't know how or why, but it's an undeniable fact. But I can't tell people "David lives in India and is happy," when they ask me what you do. They want details, and that's where I get stuck.'

I helped her out of her quandary by writing books about the Hindu teachings I had been studying and practising. Mum never read them, but she kept them around where people could see them. 'My son, the author who lives and works in India,' replaced 'My son, the missionary'.

On the same 1983 visit to Spain I asked mum why so many people wanted their charity money to go to me instead of an official organisation.

'We trust you,' she replied, 'and there are no overheads. If some small group gives you \$50 to buy schoolbooks, we know that \$50 will be spent on books and that they will go to people who need them and can't afford them. If we give \$50 to a big charity, there is no accountability. The money may go on some official's lunch. Even if schoolbooks do eventually get bought, some money goes to administration. Every time we have given you money, you have written back to say exactly what you have done with it. I read your letters out to all the donors in church. They love to hear that their donation has bought a new school uniform for a particular schoolgirl. We could never get that kind of feedback from big charities.'

This point was brought home to me a couple of weeks later when I read an advertisement in national British newspaper. The Spastic Society, a charity based in London, was advertising for a new director. My mother had spent her whole life working as a physiotherapist with spastics in under-funded, badly equipped government clinics and schools, working long hours to ensure that all her handicapped children received proper treatment. She retired as head of a huge department, yet her final salary was about a third of what was being offered to this director.

'There's a good job for you here,' I said, jokingly, 'if you want to back to work.'

Mum apparently didn't see the joke. She read the ad with a grim, tight-lipped expression on her face.

'I spent years raising money for that organisation. The government never gave us enough, so we would try to get money from the Spastics Society for special projects. I have done endless fund-raisers for them. I have stood on street corners rattling collection tins, begging for pennies. The money I raised in twenty years wouldn't pay that man's salary for six months. I've had enough of big charities. That's why I still encourage my friends to send money to you.'

When my mother moved to Spain in the early 1980s, the burden of fundraising in England was passed on to her elder sister Ivy. She was a retired school principal who frequently spoke at women's meetings. Once in a while she would mention my activities and collect money for me. In the mid-1980s I started funding operations for local people who had mild cases of leprosy. In the initial stages of the disease sufferers lose the ability to move their fingers and toes properly. An operation that costs about \$50 per hand or foot can fix the problem. I found a cycle-rickshaw driver who could no longer pedal his vehicle because he couldn't wrap his fingers around the handlebars or



Left to right: My mother's sister Ivy, my father and my mother, taken in Spain sometime in the late 1980s.

push the pedals with his feet. He was the perfect candidate for the churchwomen in England. A small donation would have him back on the road, earning his living. I funded his operation out of money they had given me and sent 'before' and 'after' photos to the group that had sent the money. They were delighted. I could see what my mother meant about getting reliable feedback on where the money was going.

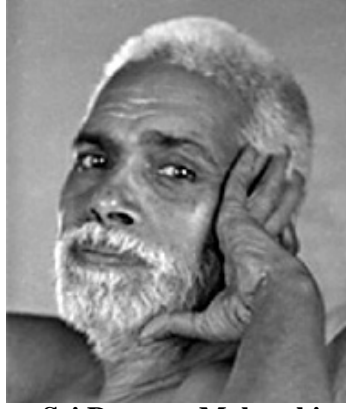
This rickshaw driver was a bit of a rogue. Once he realised there were foreigners who were willing to pay for his operation, he approached many of them independently and managed to get at least four different people to pay for his surgery. With the extra money he raised he put an engine on his rickshaw, which meant he didn't have to pedal it at all. He drank his way through the remaining profits, but I have no regrets. He can walk normally and flex his fingers properly. No one should be deprived of that degree of mobility simply because he can't afford a few \$50 operations.

I was still continuing to fund the education of various children who wouldn't otherwise be able to afford to go to school. India is a corrupt country, and the people who run schools and teach in them are just as interested in making extra cash as anyone else. The teachers who work in government schools whose students get high grades can get bribes from the parents of rich people who want their children to go there. The higher the average grades, the higher the bribes to gain admittance. This works to the advantage of poor people who have very intelligent children. The teachers need a substantial group of smart students to keep the averages up. Without them, they can't get good bribes from the rich parents of stupid kids. A poor but academically gifted child can always find a berth in a good government school so long as he or she can afford the books and the uniform. In the mid-1980s I would use my churchwomen's money to get poor but intelligent kids into the best government schools because I knew that this was their best hope in life.

After I explained this to the women in one of my letters, I never heard from them again. I have often wondered why. Were they so pure, they didn't want children to go to a school whose teachers took bribes? Did I somehow shatter their illusions? Their money was not going to pay for bribes, it was going to pay for books and uniforms. Did they have the same romantic notions of my life in India that my mother once had?

So, when the last donation ran out in the mid-to-late 1980s, my career as a fake missionary came to an end. The slack was taken up by several major foreign-funded charities that now run huge hospitals, schools and job-training programs in and around my town. These are multi-million dollar projects that benefit thousands of local people. My drop-in-the-ocean projects are no longer needed. I don't miss them, but there may be women in England who miss putting \$5 in a collection plate and then, a few weeks later, getting a letter that describes how their money has changed or transformed someone's life. I think that's what it was really all about. Long after the missionary pretense had been dropped, I gave people who cared about impoverished and disadvantaged people in the third world more bang for their buck.

BHAGAVAN, HIS LIFE AND TEACHINGS



Sri Ramana Maharshi

"That in which all these worlds seem to exist steadily, that of which all these worlds are a possession, that from which all these worlds arise, that for which all these exist, that by which all these worlds come into existence and that which is indeed all these - that alone is the existing reality. Let us cherish that Self, which is the Reality, in the Heart."

- Sri Ramana Maharshi

If you know little or nothing about Ramana Maharshi's life and teachings and want to know more, the [interview with John David](#) will be a useful introduction.

[Guru Vachaka Kovai](#) is a collection of Ramana Maharshi's teachings that was recorded in Tamil verse by Muruganar, one of his foremost disciples. This translation, by Sadhu Om and Michael James, has never been published.

[Sri Ramana Paravidyopanishad](#) is a presentation of Ramana Maharshi's teachings that was written in Sanskrit verse in the 1950s by Lakshman Sarma, a devotee who had the rare privilege of having private lessons from Bhagavan on the meaning of his teachings. The translation and commentary are by Lakshman Sarma himself.

[Ramana Puranam](#) is a long Tamil poem that was jointly composed by Bhagavan and Muruganar.

[Arunachala Pancharatnam](#) is a five-verse poem composed by Bhagavan. The item that appears here is a commentary on it by Sadhu Om.

[Who am I?](#) is a translation and commentary on Bhagavan's famous essay.

[Upadesa Undiyar](#) is the thirty-verse Tamil poem, composed by Ramana Maharshi, that is better known under its Sanskrit name, *Upadesa Saram*. The version I have posted here is a word-for-word translation by Sadhu Om and Michael James that contains additional commentary and explanations

[Upadesa Tiruvahaval](#) is the ninth poem from *Sri Ramana Sannidhi Murai*, a work by Muruganar that praises Bhagavan and records some of his teachings.

The remaining items are articles that I have written on various aspects of Ramana Maharshi's teachings. Most of them have been published in *The Mountain Path*, the journal of Sri Ramanasramam.

An Introduction to Sri Ramana's Life and Teachings

David Godman talks to John David

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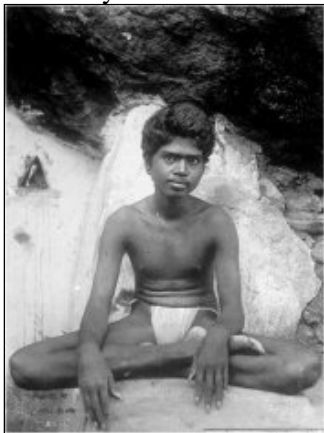
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jd: Can you begin by telling us something about Ramana Maharshi's early life? How he woke up as a young boy in Madurai.

DG: His given name was Venkataraman and he was born into a family of South Indian brahmins in Tiruchuzhi, a small town in Tamil Nadu. He came from a pious, middle-class family. His father, Sundaram Iyer, was, by profession, an 'uncertified pleader'. He represented people in legal matters, but he had no acknowledged qualifications to practice as a lawyer. Despite this handicap, he seemed to have a good practice, and he was well respected in his community.

Venkataraman had a normal childhood that showed no signs of future greatness. He was good at sports, lazy at school, indulged in an average amount of mischief, and exhibited little interest in religious matters. He did, though, have a few unusual traits. When he slept, he went into such a deep state of unconsciousness, his friends could physically assault him without waking him up. He also had an extraordinary amount of luck. In team games, whichever side he played for always won. This earned him the nickname 'Tangakai', which means 'golden hand'. It is a title given to people who exhibit a far-above-average amount of good fortune. Venkataraman also had a natural talent for the intricacies of literary Tamil. In his early teens he knew enough to correct his Tamil school teacher if he made any mistakes.



Sri Ramana Maharshi, the earliest photo taken in 1902

His father died when he was twelve and the family moved to Madurai, a city in southern Tamil Nadu. Sometime in 1896, when he was sixteen years of age, he had a remarkable spiritual awakening. He was sitting in his uncle's house when the thought occurred to him that he was about to die. He became afraid, but instead of panicking he lay down on the ground and began to analyze what was happening. He began to investigate what constituted death: what would die and what would survive that death. He spontaneously initiated a process of self-enquiry that culminated, within a few minutes, in his own permanent awakening.

In one of his rare written comments on this process he wrote:

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[Polish Translation](#)

[Tamil Translation](#)

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In this page:

[What was his first reaction? What did he think had happened to him?](#)

[Did anyone recognize him as a great saint, or at least as someone special?](#)

* * * * *



*Sundaram Iyer,
Bhagavan's father
(Click on image to
enlarge)*

'Enquiring within "Who is the seer?" I saw the seer disappear leaving That alone which stands forever. No thought arose to say "I saw". How then could the thought arise to say "I did not see".' In those few moments his individual identity disappeared and was replaced by a full awareness of the Self. That experience, that awareness, remained with him for the rest of his life. He had no need to do any more practice or meditation because this death-experience left him in a state of complete and final liberation. This is something very rare in the spiritual world: that someone who had no interest in the spiritual life should, within the space of a few minutes, and without any effort or prior practice, reach a state that other seekers spend lifetimes trying to attain.

I say 'without effort' because this re-enactment of death and the subsequent self-enquiry seemed to be something that happened to him, rather than something he did. When he described this event for his Telugu biographer, the pronoun 'I' never appeared. He said, 'The body lay on the ground, the limbs stretched themselves out,' and so on. That particular description really leaves the reader with the feeling that this event was utterly impersonal. Some power took over the boy Venkataraman, made him lie on the floor and finally made him understand that death is for the body and for the sense of individuality, and that it cannot touch the underlying reality in which they both appear.

When the boy Venkataraman got up, he was a fully enlightened sage, but he had no cultural or spiritual context to evaluate properly what had happened to him. He had read some biographies of ancient Tamil saints and he had attended many temple rituals, but none of this seemed to relate to the new state that he found himself in.

jd: What was his first reaction? What did he think had happened to him?

DG: Years later, when he was recollecting this experience he said that he thought at the time that he had caught some strange disease. However, he thought that it was such a nice disease, he hoped he wouldn't recover from it. At one time, soon after the experience, he also speculated that he might have been possessed. When he discussed the events with Narasimhaswami, his first English biographer, he repeatedly used the Tamil word *avesam*, which means possession by a spirit, to describe his initial reactions to the event.

jd: Did he discuss it with anyone? Did he try to find out what had happened to him?

DG: Venkataraman told no one in his family what had happened to him. He tried to carry on as if nothing unusual had occurred. He continued to attend school and kept up a veneer of normality for his family, but as the weeks went by he found it harder and harder to keep up this façade because he was pulled inside more and more. At the end of August 1896 he fell into a deep state of absorption in the Self when he should have been writing out a text he had been given as a punishment for not doing his schoolwork properly.

His brother scornfully said, 'What is the use of all this for one like this?' meaning, 'What use is family life for someone spends all

his time behaving like a yogi?'

The justice of the remark struck Venkataraman, making him decide to leave home forever. The following day he left, without telling anyone where he was going, or what had happened to him. He merely left a note saying that he was off on a 'virtuous enterprise' and that no money should be spent searching for him. His destination was Arunachala, a major pilgrimage center a few hundred miles to the north. In his note to his family he wrote 'I have, in search of my father and in obedience to his command, started from here'. His father was Arunachala, and in abandoning his home and family he was following an internal summons from the mountain of Arunachala.

He had an adventurous trip to Tiruvannamalai, taking three days for a journey that, with better information, he could have completed in less than a day. He arrived on September 1st 1896 and spent the rest of his life here.

jd: For someone who doesn't know much about Arunachala, could you paint a picture of what this place is like, and what it signifies? Perhaps also say what it would have been like when Ramana Maharshi first arrived.

DG: The town of Tiruvannamalai, with its associated mountain, Arunachala, has always been a major pilgrimage center. The town's heart and soul haven't changed that much in recent times despite the presence of auto-rickshaws, TV aerials and a vast expanse of suburbs. The basic culture and way of life of people in Tiruvannamalai have probably been the same for centuries. Marco Polo came to Tamil Nadu in the 1200s on his way home from China. His description of what people were doing and how they were living are very recognizable to people who live here today.

Tiruvannamalai has one of the principal Siva-*lingam* temples in South India. There are five temples, each corresponding to one of the elements: earth, water, fire, air and space. Tiruvannamalai is the fire *lingam*.

The earliest records of this place go back to about AD 500, at which point it's already famous. Saints were touring around Tamil Nadu in those days, praising Arunachala as the place where Siva resides, and recommending everyone to go there. Before that, there aren't really any records because local people didn't start writing things down or making stone buildings that would last.

There's a much older tradition that suddenly appears in the historical record about 1,500 years ago, simply because a major cultural change resulted in people making proper monuments and writing things down. I would say that Ramana Maharshi was, in this historical context, the most recent and probably the most famous representative of a whole stream of extraordinary saints who have been drawn by the power of this place for at least, I would guess, 2000 years.

jd: When was the big temple built?

DG: It grew in layers, in squares, from the inside out. Once upon a time there was probably a shrine about the size of a small room. You can date all these things because the walls of temples here are public record offices. Whenever a king wins a war with his

neighbor, he gets someone to chisel the fact on the side of a temple wall. Or, if he gives 500 acres to someone he likes, that fact also is chiseled on the temple wall. That's where you go to see who's winning the battles and what the king is giving away, and to whom.

The earliest inscriptions, they're called epigraphs, on the inner shrine date from the ninth century, so that's probably the time it was built. Progressively, up to about the 1600s the temple got bigger and bigger and bigger. It reached its current dimensions in the seventeenth century. For people who have never seen this building, I should say that it's huge. I would guess that each of the four sides is about 200 yards long, and the main tower is over 200 feet high.



*Arunachaleshwara
Temple*
(Click on image to
enlarge)

jd: And that's where Bhagavan came to when he arrived?

DG: When Bhagavan was very young he intuitively knew that Arunachala signified God in some way. In one of his verses he wrote, 'From my unthinking childhood the immensity of Arunachala had shone in my awareness'. He didn't know then that it was a place that he could go to; he just had this association with the word Arunachala. He felt, 'this is the holiest place, this is the holiest state, this is God himself'. He was in awe of Arunachala and what it represented without ever really understanding that it was a pilgrimage place that he could actually go to. It wasn't until he was a teenager that one of his relatives actually came back from here and said, 'I've been to Arunachala'. Bhagavan said it was an anticlimax. Before, he had imagined it to be some great heavenly realm that holy, enlightened people went to when they died. To find he could go there on a train was a bit of a let down.

His first reaction to the word Arunachala was absolute awe. Later there was a brief period of anticlimax when he realized it was just a place on the map. Later still, after his enlightenment experience, he understood that it was the power of Arunachala that had precipitated the experience and pulled him physically to this place.

The verse I just quoted from chronicles the early stages of his relationship with the mountain:

Look, there [Arunachala] stands as if insentient.
Mysterious is the way it works, beyond all human
understanding. From my unthinking childhood, the
immensity of Arunachala had shone in my awareness,
but even when I learned from someone that it was only
Tiruvannamalai, I did not realize its meaning. When it
stilled my mind and drew me to itself and I came near, I
saw that it was stillness absolute.

The last line contains a very nice pun. *Achala* is Sanskrit for 'mountain' and it also means 'absolute stillness'. On one level this poem is describing Bhagavan's physical pilgrimage to Tiruvannamalai, but in another sense he is talking about his mind going back into the heart and becoming totally silent and still.

When he arrived, and this is something you won't find in any of the standard biographies, he said he stood in front of the temple. It was closed at the time, but all the doors, right through to the innermost shrine, spontaneously opened for him. He walked straight in, went up to the *lingam* and hugged it.

He didn't really want this version of events publicized for two reasons. First, he didn't like letting people know that miracles were happening around him. When such events happened, he tried to play them down. Second, he knew that the temple priests would get very upset if they found out that he had touched their *lingam*. Even though he was a brahmin, the temple priests would take his act to be a contaminating one, and they would have had to order a special elaborate *puja* to reconsecrate the *lingam*. Not wanting to upset them, he kept quiet.

jd: Yes, we've just come from the temple just now and there's a huge lock on the door.

DG: Yes. Ordinarily, no outsider can get anywhere near the *lingam*. Looking after it is a hereditary profession. No one from outside this lineage is allowed over the metal bar that is about ten feet in front of the *lingam*.

There is another interesting aspect to this story. From the moment of his enlightenment in Madurai there was a strong burning sensation in Bhagavan's body that only went away when he hugged the *lingam*. Touching the *lingam* grounded or dissipated the energy. The *lingam* in the temple is not just a representation of Arunachala. It is held to be Arunachala himself. The hugging of the *lingam* was the final act of physical union between Bhagavan and his Guru, Arunachala.

I have not read of any other visit by Bhagavan to the inner shrine. This may have been the only time he went. One visit was enough to transact this particular piece of business.

Bhagavan always loved the physical form of the mountain Arunachala and spent as much time as he could on its slopes, but his business with the temple *lingam* was completed within a few minutes of his arrival in 1896.

jd: Am I right in thinking that from then on he pretty much stayed within the confines of the temple?

DG: After this dramatic arrival, he stayed in various parts of the temple for several months. The day he arrived he threw away all his money into a local tank; he shaved his head, which is a sign of physical renunciation; he threw away all his clothes and he just sat quietly, often in a deep *samadhi* in which he was completely unaware of his body or his surroundings. It was his destiny to stay alive and become a great teacher, so people force-fed him and looked after him in other ways. Without that particular destiny to fulfill, he would have probably given up his body or died from physical neglect. For the first three or four years he was here, he was mostly unaware of anything around him. He rarely ate, and at one time his body started to rot. Portions of his legs became open, festering sores, but he didn't even notice.

jd: This is when he was sitting down in that kind of basement?

DG: Yes. have you been there? It's called Patala Lingam. He was in that place for about six weeks. At the end of that period he had to be physically carried out and cleaned up.

In his early years here he said that he would open his eyes,

without knowing how long he had been oblivious to the world. He would stand up and try to take a few steps. If his legs were reasonably strong, he would infer that he had been unaware of his body for a relatively short period - perhaps a day or two. If his legs buckled when he stood to walk, he would realize that he had probably been in a deep *samadhi* for many days, possibly weeks. Sometimes he would open his eyes and discover that he was not in the place where he had sat when he closed his eyes. He had no recollection of his body moving from one place to another within one of the temple *mantapams*.



Patala Lingam
(Click on image to
enlarge)

jd: Did anyone recognize him as a great saint, or at least as someone special?

DG: There were a few. Seshadri Swami, who was also a local saint, spotted him while he was sitting in the Patala Lingam. He tried to look after him and protect him, but without much success. Bhagavan has spoken of one or two other people who intuitively knew that he was in a very elevated state, but in those days, they were very few in numbers.

jd: Were they people in the temple?

DG: Seshadri Swami lived all over the place. There were probably two or three other people who even then recognized him as being something special. Some people revered him simply because he was living such an ascetic life, but there were other people who seemed to know that he was in a high state. The grandfather of a man who later became the ashram's lawyer was one whom Bhagavan said had a full appreciation of who he really was.

Next: [So how did it happen that he moved from there up on the hill?](#)



Seshadri Swami
(Click on image to
enlarge)

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David Godman talks to John David

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jd: In those days you could easily take his behavior as a sign of being a bit crazy, yes? For example, there was a man in the ashram this morning wearing a loincloth, rather like Bhagavan's loincloth, with a French accent. He could be a famous saint or he could be a loony. It wouldn't be very easy to decide at the moment.

* * * * *

In this page:

[From the way you're telling the story, it has always been clear that he was a saint.](#)

[When did the ashram begin to get big?](#)

* * * * *

DG: People get the benefit of the doubt here, especially if they are sitting all day, absolutely still, and not eating. That's hard to fake. You don't sit in full lotus, absolutely motionless, for a few days just to get a free meal. But at the same time, it doesn't prove you are enlightened. There was a man here in Bhagavan's time who sat eighteen hours a day in full lotus with his eyes closed. His name was Govind Bhat and he lived in Palakottu, a *sadhu* colony adjacent to Ramanashram. He tried to attract devotees even while Bhagavan was alive, but he didn't do very well. In the end it is the enlightenment not the physical antics that attracts the real devotees.

jd: So how did it happen that he moved from there up on the hill?

DG: Have you been to a place called Gurumurtham? It's a temple about a mile out of town. A man who was looking after Bhagavan invited him to go and stay in a mango orchard that was next to this temple. He moved out there for about a year and a half. That was the furthest away from the mountain he ever went in all his fifty-four years here. Even there he was mostly unaware of his body and the world. He said his fingernails grew to be several inches long. He didn't comb or wash his hair for a couple of years. Many years later he commented that if one doesn't comb one's hair it becomes very matted and it grows very quickly. By the end of his time at Gurumurtham, he had long matted hair and long fingernails.



Gurumurtham

He has said that he could hear people whispering outside, saying 'This man's been in there for hundreds of years'. Because of the

extent of his asceticism, he looked old even when he was eighteen.

jd: From the way you're telling the story, it has always been clear that he was a saint.

DG: Clear to whom? It is easy to say this in hindsight, but at the time there were many local people who had no opinion of him at all. The population of Tiruvannamalai around 1900 was probably in the region of 20,000. If twenty people came to see him regularly, and the rest didn't bother, that means 99.9% of the local people either didn't know anything about him, or didn't care enough to pay him a visit.

His uncle, who came in the 1890s to try and bring him home, asked people in town, 'What's he doing? Why is he behaving like this?' The replies he received were not positive. His uncle was led to believe that he was just a truant who should be taken home. Even in later years there were many people in Tiruvannamalai who didn't have a high opinion of him. The people who became his devotees are the ones who left some records, so the published opinions of him are a bit one-sided.

jd: So, when he was already twenty or so, were there devotees already coming to spend time with him?

DG: He arrived when he was sixteen and for the next two or three years he sometimes had one full-time attendant, plus a few people who occasionally came to see him.

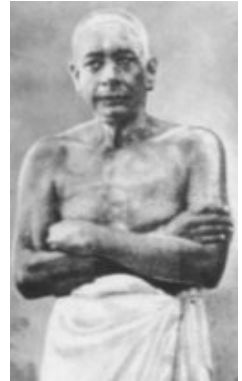
It wasn't really until the early years of the last century that people started coming regularly. By the beginning of the first decade of the twentieth century he had a small group of followers. A few people brought him food regularly and a few others were frequent visitors. A large number of curiosity seekers would come to have a look at him and go away. Apart from these tourists, he seems to have had perhaps four or five regular devotees.

jd: Were those people local people?

DG: They were mostly locals. One woman called Akhilandamma, who lived about forty miles away, used to come from her village and bring him food once in a while. Another, Sivaprakasam Pillai, lived in another town, but he came for *darshan* regularly. Just about everyone else lived here in Tiruvannamalai.

jd: And he went from the mango orchard up onto the hill?

DG: Around 1901 he moved up to Virupaksha Cave and stayed there for about fifteen years, but it was not a good place to live all year round. In summer it was too hot. He stayed there for about eight months a year and then moved to other nearby caves and shrines such as Guhai Namasivaya Temple, Sadguru Swami Cave and a place called Mango Tree Cave.



Sivaprakasam Pillai
(Click on image to
enlarge)



*The gopuram over the
entrance to the Guhai
Namasivaya Temple*
(Click on image to
enlarge)



The entrance to Virupaksha Cave. The photo was taken before extensive modern renovations added a new room to the front.

They are all less than five minutes' walk from Virupaksha Cave. There's a big tank up there, Mulaipal Tirtham, a little lower down the hill from Virupaksha Cave. This was the *sadhus'* water supply. Everybody up there was dependent on that tank, so all their caves and their huts were in walking distance of that tank.

jd: Now, it's become a bit of a farm up there, a lot of cows and what have you.

DG: Things move on.

jd: But in fact there's a stream that runs right past the cave. Whenever I've been there

DG: It doesn't run all year, and when Bhagavan moved into the cave it wasn't there at all. There was a big thunderstorm one summer that produced an avalanche that carried away many of the rocks that were near the cave. After the debris had been cleared away, it was discovered that a new spring was coming out of nearby rocks. The devotees said that it was a gift from Arunachala, and Bhagavan seemed to agree with them.

jd: It seems a nice little water supply.

DG: It's very seasonal. We have just had a week and a half of good rain. If it doesn't rain, within a week it will dry up, so it's not that good a source.

jd: Is that the same spring that goes through Skandashram?

DG: No, Virupaksha Cave has an independent spring. Skandashram probably has the best spring on that side of the hill. That spring also didn't exist when Bhagavan first moved onto the hill. He went on a walk there - it's a few hundred feet higher up the mountain from Virupaksha Cave - noticed a damp patch and recommended that it be dug out to see if there was a good water source there. There was, and the stream that now flows through Skandashram is the highest



The entrance to Virupaksha cave today.

[\(Click on image to enlarge\)](#)



The samadhi of Saint Virupaksha, which is said to contain the vibhuti that his body metamorphosed into at the time of his physical death.

[\(Click on image to enlarge\)](#)

source of permanent water on the hill. It's about 600 feet above the town.

jd: Does that mean Skandashram didn't exist in those days?

DG: No. It's named after a man called Kandaswami who started building it in the early years of the last century.

Kandaswami did a massive amount of work on the site. When he started it was a 45-degree scree slope. He dug back into the side of the hill and used the excavated soil and rocks to make a flat terrace on the side of the hill. He planted many coconut and mango trees, which are still there. It's a beautiful place now, a shady oasis on the side of the hill.



*The main building
at Skandashram*
(Click on image to
enlarge)

jd: So when Bhagavan moved up there, it was pretty well set. There were some buildings and a terrace?

DG: The terrace was there and the young trees had been planted, but there was only one small hut that was not big enough for everyone. The devotees of the time did some fundraising and erected the structure that can be seen there today.

jd: Do you know how many people were there with Bhagavan? Half a dozen?

DG: In Virupaksha Cave about four or five would be a good average. By the time Bhagavan moved to Skandashram, the average numbers were probably up to ten or twelve. I am talking about people who lived with Bhagavan full time, and who slept with him at night. There were many other people who just visited and left.

jd: So even in the cave there were in fact people living there with him?

DG: Yes, they ate with him and slept there at night. Many of them left during the day to do things elsewhere. They were not sitting there all the time. They were all men, by the way. Until Bhagavan's mother arrived in 1914, only men were allowed to sleep in Virupaksha Cave. Even though there was no formal structure, the people who lived with Bhagavan tended to regard themselves as celibate *sadhus*. They regarded the cave as a men-only ashram.

Initially these *sadhus* didn't want Bhagavan's mother to move in with them. However, when Bhagavan declared, 'If you make her leave, I will also leave along with her,' they had to back down and allow her to stay.

jd: So, when he lived in the cave he wasn't in 'retreat' or in 'solitary silence'. You know, the image of Bhagavan is always of this totally silent, totally alone person.

DG: He behaved differently in different phases of his life. In the late 1890s, when he was in his late teens, he almost never interacted with anyone. Most of the time he just sat with his eyes closed, either in the temple or in nearby temples and shrines. He knew what was going on because in later years he would often talk about incidents from this era, but he hardly ever spoke. The period of

rarely speaking lasted for about ten years, up to about 1906. He hadn't taken a vow of silence, he had just temporarily lost the ability to articulate sounds. When he tried to speak, a kind of guttural noise would initially come out of his throat. Sometimes he would have to make three or four attempts to get the words out. Because it was so hard to speak, he preferred silence.

Around 1906-7, when he recovered his ability to speak normally, he began to interact verbally with the people around him. By this time he was also spending a lot of time wandering around by himself on Arunachala. He loved being out on the mountain. It was his main passion, his only attachment.

jd: And that would be alone? He would go around alone?

DG: Occasionally he would take people out for brief walks but mostly he was alone.

jd: Is it on record who was his first disciple? Perhaps we shouldn't say 'first disciple'.

DG: There were people who looked after him in his early years here who could be regarded as his earliest devotees. The most prominent was Palaniswami who looked after him from the 1890s until he passed away in 1915. The two of them were inseparable for almost twenty years.



Palaniswami
(Click on image)

jd: So this man would have lived at the cave with Bhagavan?

DG: Yes, he was the full-time attendant at Virupaksha Cave. He also lived with Bhagavan at Gurumurtham.

jd: And gradually other people were attracted and would become fairly permanent. Presumably, there was no formal initiation?

DG: I really don't know who decided, 'OK, you can sleep here tonight'. There was no management, no check-in department.

Everyone was welcome to come and sit with Bhagavan - all day if they wanted to. And if they were still there at night, they could also sleep there. If food was available, everyone who was present would share.

Bhagavan never had much to do with who was there and who wasn't, who was allowed to stay and who wasn't. If people wanted to stay they stayed, and if they wanted to leave they left.

jd: And presumably that continued. I mean, he was never actively involved in managing the ashram, was he?

DG: In the Virupaksha period there wasn't a lot of work going on. It was a community of begging *sadhus* who just stayed with Bhagavan whenever they felt like it. People would go to town, beg on the streets, collect the food, and bring it back to Virupaksha Cave. Bhagavan would mix it all up together, distribute it, and that was the food for the day. If not enough food was begged, people went hungry. Nobody was cooking, so there was no work to do except for occasional cleaning. After his mother came in 1914, the

kitchen work started. Slowly, slowly it got to the situation where if you wanted to live full time with him, you had to work.

Even today the people who eat and sleep full time in the ashram have to work there. It's not a place for people who want to sit and meditate all day. If you want to do that, you live somewhere else.

jd: So that would have been when they moved to Skandashram?

DG: It got a bit more organized when Bhagavan moved to Skandashram, but it was still a community of begging *sadhus* right up to the early 1920s. Bhagavan himself went begging in the 1890s. I wouldn't say he encouraged begging, but he thought it was a good tradition. Go out and beg your food, eat what people give you, sleep under a tree and wake up the next day with nothing. He heartily approved of a lifestyle like this, but it wasn't one he could follow himself once he settled down and an ashram grew up around him.

jd: And he wore just a loincloth?

DG: In the beginning, for the first few months, he was naked. A couple of months after he arrived, there was a big festival in the temple. Some devotees lifted him up and dressed him in a loincloth because they knew that he might be arrested if he sat in a prominent place with no clothes on. For most of his life he only wore a loincloth, occasionally supplemented by a *dhoti* that he would tie under his armpits, rather than round his waist. It gets quite cold here on winter mornings, but he never seemed to want or need more clothes.

jd: When did the ashram begin to get big?

DG: Coming down the hill was the big move in Bhagavan's life. When his mother died in 1922, she was buried where the ashram is now located. The spot was chosen because it was the Hindu graveyard in those days. Bhagavan continued to live at Skandashram, but about six months later he came down the hill and didn't go back up. He never gave any reason for staying at the foot of the hill. He just said he didn't feel any impulse to go back to Skandashram. That's how the current Ramanashram started.

jd: So the ashram's actually built on a Hindu burial ground?

DG: Yes. In those days the graveyard was well outside the town. Now the town has expanded to include Ramanashram, and the present Hindu graveyard is now a mile further out of town.

Next: [So he saw himself as a 'friend' not as 'the Master'.](#)

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An Introduction to Sri Ramana's Life and Teachings

David Godman talks to John David

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jd: How did the ashram come to take over the land round here?

DG: The place where Bhagavan's mother was buried was actually owned by a *math*, a religious institution, in town. The man who headed that organization had a high opinion of Bhagavan, so he handed over the land to the emerging Ramanashram. When Bhagavan's mother died, the devotees had to get permission from the head of this *math* to bury her on this land, but there was no problem since he was also a devotee.

jd: And the first building, was it the shrine over the mother's grave?

DG: Well, shrine is a bit of a fancy word. A really wonderful photo was taken here in 1922, shortly after Bhagavan settled here. The only building is a coconut-leaf hut. It looks as if one good gust of wind would blow it over. People who came to see him that year have reported that there wasn't even room for two people in the room where Bhagavan lived. That was the first ashram building here: a coconut-leaf hut that probably leaked when it rained.



The beginnings of Sri Ramanasramam in 1922

jd: It's very beautiful now - water, trees, peacocks. It must have been very primitive eighty years ago.

DG: I talked to the man who cleared the land here. He told me there were large boulders and many cacti and thorn bushes. It wasn't really forest. It's not the right climate for a luxuriant forest, and there isn't much soil. The granite bedrock is often close to the surface, and there are many rocky outcrops. This man, Ramaswami Pillai, said that he spent the first six months prising out boulders with a crowbar, cutting down cacti and leveling the ground.

jd: When the building started, was Bhagavan himself involved in that?

DG: I don't think he built the first coconut leaf hut but once he moved here he was very much a hands-on manager. The first proper building over the Mother's Samadhi was organized and built by him. Have you seen how bricks are made round here?

* * * * *

In this page:

[You say he 'abhorred waste'. Can you expand on that a little?](#)

[You were saying he was a very natural person who liked very natural people. I presume he also liked animals.](#)

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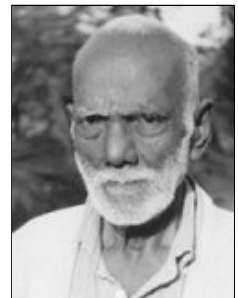


The current entrance to

[*Sri Ramanasramam.*](#)

The iluppai tree in the foreground was there when the ashram was founded in 1922

[\(Click on image to enlarge\)](#)



Ramaswami Pillai

jd: Possibly.

DG: It's like making mud pies. You start with a brick-shaped mould. You make a pile of mud and then use the mould to make thousands of mud bricks that you put out in the sun to dry. After they have been properly dried, you stack them in a structure the size of a house that has big holes in the base for logs to be put in. The outside of the stack is sealed with wet mud and fires are lit at the base. Once the fire has taken, the bottom is sealed as well. The bricks are baked in a hot, oxygen-free environment, in the same way that charcoal is made. After two or three days the fires die down, and if nothing has gone wrong, the bricks are properly baked. However, if the fires go out too soon, or if it rains heavily during the baking, the bricks don't get cooked properly. When that happens, the whole production is often wasted because the bricks are soft and crumbly - more like biscuits rather than bricks.

In the 1920s someone tried to make bricks near the ashram, but the baking was unsuccessful and all the half-baked bricks were abandoned. Bhagavan, who abhorred waste of any kind, decided to use all these commercially useless bricks to build a shrine over his mother's grave. One night he had everyone in the ashram line up between the kiln and the ashram. Bricks were passed from hand to hand until there were enough in the ashram to make a building. The next day he did the bricklaying himself as he and his devotees raised a wall around the *samadhi*. Bhagavan did a lot of work on the inside of the wall because people felt that, since it was going to be a temple, the interior work should be done by brahmins.

This was the only building that he constructed himself, but years later, when the large granite buildings that make up much of the present ashram were erected, he was the architect, the engineer and the building supervisor. He was there every day, giving orders and checking up on progress.

jd: You say he 'abhorred waste'. Can you expand on that a little?

DG: He had the attitude that anything that came to the ashram was a gift from God, and that it should be properly utilized. He would pick up stray mustard seeds that he found on the kitchen floor with his fingernails and insist that they be stored and used; he used to cut the white margins off proof copies of ashram books, stitch them together and make little notebooks out of them; he would attempt to cook parts of vegetables, such as the spiky ends of aubergines, that are normally thrown away. He admitted that he was a bit of a fanatic on this subject.

He once remarked, 'It's a good thing I never got married. No woman would have been able to put up with my habits.'

jd: Going back to his building activities, how involved in day-to-day decisions was he? Did he, for example, decide where the doors and windows went?

DG: Yes. Either he would explain what he wanted verbally, or he would make little sketches on the backs of envelopes or on scrap pieces of paper.

jd: What you're describing now is a totally different Bhagavan from the one who sat in *samadhi* all day. Most people think that he spent his whole life sitting quietly in the hall, doing nothing.

DG: He didn't like sitting in the hall all day. He often said that it was his prison. If he was off doing some work when visitors came, someone would come and tell him that he was needed in the hall. That's where he usually met with new people.

He would sigh and remark, 'People have come. I have to go back to jail.'

jd: 'Got to go sit on the couch'.

DG: Yes. 'Got to go and sit on the couch and tell people how to get enlightened.'

Bhagavan enjoyed all kinds of physical work, but he particularly enjoyed cooking. He was the ashram's head cook for at least fifteen years. He got up at two or three o'clock every morning, cut vegetables and supervised the cooking. When the new ashram buildings were going up in the 1920s and 30s, he was also the supervising engineer and architect.

jd: I think what you've just been speaking about is in a way very important in general. People have set ideas about Bhagavan. Most people have an image of him as a man who sat on a couch, looking blissful and doing nothing. What you are describing is a completely different man.

DG: His state didn't change from the age of sixteen onwards, but his outer activities did. In the beginning of his life here at Arunachala he was quiet and rarely did anything. Thirty years later he had a hectic and busy schedule, but his experience of who he was never wavered during this later phase of busy-ness.

jd: I like the way you're speaking because in a way you're debunking a lot of spiritual myths.

DG: Bhagavan never felt comfortable with a situation in which he sat on a couch in the role of a 'Guru', with everyone on the floor around him. He liked to work and live with people, interacting with them in a normal, natural way, but as the years went by, the possibilities for this kind of life became less and less.

One of the problems was that people were often completely overawed by him. Most people couldn't act normally around him. Many of the visitors wanted to put him on a pedestal and treat him like a god, but he didn't seem to appreciate that kind of treatment.

There are some nice stories of new people behaving naturally and getting a natural response from Bhagavan. Major Chadwick wrote that Bhagavan would come to his room after lunch, go through his things like an inquisitive child, sit on the bed and chat with him. However, when Chadwick once put out a chair in the expectation of Bhagavan's arrival, the visits stopped. Chadwick had made the transition from having a 'friend' who dropped by to having a Guru who needed respect and a special chair. When this formality was introduced, the visits ended.

jd: So he saw himself as a 'friend' not as 'the Master'.

DG: Bhagavan didn't have a perspective of his own, he simply reacted to the way people around him thought about him and treated him. He could be a friend, a father, a brother, a god, depending on the devotee's way of approaching him. One woman was convinced that Bhagavan was her baby son. She had a little doll that looked like Bhagavan, and she would cradle it like a baby when she was in his presence. Her belief in this relationship was so strong, she actually started lactating when she held her Bhagavan doll.

Bhagavan seemed to approve of any Guru-disciple relationship that kept the devotee's attention on the Self or the form of the Guru, but at the same time he still liked and enjoyed people who could treat him as a normal being.

Bhagavan sometimes said that it didn't matter how you regarded the Guru, so long as you could think about him all the time. As an extreme example he cited two people from ancient times who got enlightened by hating God so much, they couldn't stop thinking about Him.

There is a Tamil phrase that translates as 'Mother-father-Guru-God'. A lot of people felt that way about him.

Bhagavan himself said he never felt that he was a Guru in a Guru-disciple relationship with anyone. His public position was that he didn't have any disciples at all because, he said, from the perspective of the Self there was no one who was different or separate from him. Being the Self and knowing that the Self alone exists, he knew that there were no unenlightened people who needed to be enlightened. He said he only ever saw enlightened people around him.

Having said that, Bhagavan clearly did function as a Guru to the thousands of people who had faith in him and who tried to carry out his teachings.

jd: During which period was Bhagavan actively involved in the building work?

DG: The ashram started to change from coconut-leaf structures to stone buildings around 1930. The big building phase was 1930-42. The Mother's Temple was built after that, but Bhagavan wasn't supervising the design and construction of that so much. That work was subcontracted to expert temple builders. Bhagavan visited the site regularly, but he wasn't so involved in design or engineering decisions.

jd: If anybody had visited during those twelve years they would have found a Bhagavan who was not sitting on the couch. They would have found him out working, supervising workers?

DG: It would have depended on when they came. Bhagavan had a routine that he kept to. He was always in the hall for the morning and evening chanting - two periods of about forty-five minutes each. He would be there in the evening, chatting to all the ashram's workers who could not see him during the day because of their various duties in different parts of the ashram. He would be there if



Supervising building construction
(Click on image to enlarge)

visitors arrived who wanted to speak to him. He walked regularly on the hill, or to Palakottu, an area adjacent to the ashram. These walks generally took place after meals. He would fit in his other jobs around these events. If nothing or no one needed his attention in the hall, he might go and see how the cooks were getting on, or he might go to the cowshed to check up on the ashram's cows. If there was a big building project going on, he would often go out to check up on the progress of the work. Mostly though, he did his tours of the building sites after lunch, when everyone else was having a siesta.

He supervised many workers, not just the ones who put up the buildings. Devotees in the hall would bind and rebind books under his supervision, the cooks would work according to his instructions, and so on. The only area he didn't seem inclined to get involved in was the ashram office. He let his brother have a fairly free rein there, although once in a while he would intervene if he felt that something that had been neglected ought to be done.

In earlier years, up to 1926, he would also walk round the base of Arunachala quite regularly.

jd: Would a few people follow him?

DG: Yes, large crowds would go with him in the later years, and when he passed through town there would be even more people waiting for him, trying to feed him, or attempting to get him into their houses. He turned down all these invitations. After the 1890s he never entered a private house in town.

He stopped going round the hill in 1926 because people started fighting over who should stay behind in the ashram. No one wanted to be left behind, but someone always had to remain to guard the property.

Finally he said, 'If I stop going there won't be any more fights about who is going to stay behind'.

He never did the walk again.

jd: You were saying he was a very natural person who liked very natural people. I presume he also liked animals.

DG: Almost all of them. I have read that he didn't particularly like cats, but I don't know what the evidence is for that. As far as I can make out, he loved all the animals in the ashram. He showed a particular fondness for the dogs, the monkeys and the squirrels.

jd: And they, presumably, lived in the ashram as well?

DG: Bhagavan used to say that people in the ashram were squatting on land that belonged to the animals, and that the local wild animals had prior tenancy rights. He never approved of animals being driven away either to make more room for people, or because some people didn't like having animals around. He always took the side of the animals whenever there was any attempt to throw them out or inconvenience them in any way.

He had squirrels on his sofa. They moved in and made nests in the grass roof over his head, they ran all over his body, and had babies in his cushions. Once in a while he'd sit on one and accidentally suffocate it. They were all over the place.

jd: He sounds like a very natural person who felt it normal and natural to have animals around him.

DG: It was natural and normal for him, but it was not natural and normal for many the people who congregated around him. Bhagavan always had to fight in the animals' corner to make sure they got proper treatment, or were not unnecessarily inconvenienced.

The big new hall, the stone building in front of the Mother's Temple, was built for Bhagavan in the 1940s. The old hall that he had lived in since the late 1920s was by then too small for the crowds of people that wanted to see him. The new hall was a large, grandiose, granite space that resembled a temple *mantapam*, but it was an intimidating place for some people and for all of the animals.

When Bhagavan was shown where he was going to sit, he asked, 'What about the squirrels? Where are they going to live?'

There were no niches for them to sit in, or grassy materials to raid for their nests. Bhagavan also complained that the building would intimidate some of the poor people who wanted to come and see him. He always saw things like this from the side of the underdog, whether animal or human.

jd: That large stone couch somehow seems to be for the wrong person.

DG: Yes, that wasn't his style at all. There was a sculptor making a stone statue of him at the same time that the finishing touches were being made to this new hall. When Bhagavan was told that this new carved, granite sofa was for him, he remarked, 'Let the stone swami sit on the stone sofa'. He eventually did move into this hall because there was nowhere else where he could meet with large numbers of people, but he didn't stay there long.

jd: And that was about a year before he gave up his body?

DG: The temple over his Mother's *samadhi* was inaugurated in March 1949, and Bhagavan moved into the new hall shortly afterwards. He developed a cancer, a sarcoma, on his arm that year. It physically debilitated him to the extent that he couldn't walk to his bathroom and back. At that point his bathroom was converted into a room for him. That's where he spent the last few months of his life.

jd: That's the place they call the *samadhi* room?

DG: Yes. An energetic Tamil woman, Janaki Amma, came to the ashram in the 1940s. When she asked to be shown to the women's bathroom, she was told that there wasn't one. She arranged for one to be built, and this was the room that Bhagavan spent his final days in. It was the nearest bathroom to the new hall that he moved into in 1949. It became his bathroom at that time because no one wanted to inconvenience him by making him walk any further. He refused to let anyone help him when he walked to this bathroom, even when he was extremely weak. Have you seen the video of him



Two views of the stone sofa and the statue of Ramana Maharshi in the New Hall.

Sri Ramana met visitors and devotees here for several months in 1949.

[\(Click on images to enlarge\)](#)

in his last year?

jd: Probably.

DG: It's excruciating to watch. His knees have massive swellings on them, and they seem to shake from side to side. It is clear from this footage that he was extremely debilitated, but he would never let anyone help him to move around. There is an elaborate stone step in the doorway of the new hall. Devotees would have to stand by, completely helpless, as Bhagavan would attempt to climb over this obstruction. No one was allowed to offer assistance. Eventually, when this step proved to be too much of an obstacle, he moved into the bathroom and stayed there until he passed away in April 1950.

Next: **It's called *Who am I?* but it covers all kinds of things: the nature of happiness, what the world is, how it apparently comes into existence, how it disappears.**

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jd: Is it right that during that time he was still available?

DG: He was very insistent that anyone who wanted to see him could have *darshan* at least once a day. When people realized he wasn't going to be here much longer, the crowds increased. For the last few weeks there was a 'walking *darshan*'. People would file past his room and *pranam* to him one by one.

* * * * *

In this page:

[So the impression of him being silent is not really true?](#)

jd: And that went on until his last day?

DG: Yes, he gave his final public *darshan* on the afternoon of the day he died.

[Is he on the record as saying that it is the quickest and most direct way?](#)

jd: Yes, I actually met someone who walked past him the day before he died.

* * * * *

DG: He insisted that the public should have as much access as possible. Up until the 1940s, the doors of his room were open twenty-four hours a day. If you wanted to see him at 3 a.m., no one would stop you from walking in and seeing him. If you had some problem, you could go and tell him in the middle of the night.

jd: So even though he was doing a lot of work - cutting vegetables, working on the buildings and so on - he was, in fact, always available?

DG: In that era of his life there weren't too many people around him. You are talking about the years when he was actively involved in cooking and building work. In those days, if a group of people came to see him, he would go to the hall to see what they wanted.

Everybody who lived in the ashram had a job. You were either working in the cowshed or the kitchen, the garden, the office, and so on. These ashram residents were not allowed to sit with Bhagavan during the day because they had work to do. In the evening all the ashram workers would gather around Bhagavan, and for a few hours they would generally have him to themselves. The visitors would usually go home in the evening. The people whom he saw during the day in the hall would be visitors to the ashram, along with a few devotees who had houses nearby.

jd: Was everyone free to question him?

DG: In theory, yes, but many people were far too intimidated to approach him. He would sometimes talk without prompting, without being questioned. He liked to tell stories about famous saints, and he often told stories about what had happened to him in various stages of his life. He was a great storyteller, and whenever he had a good story to tell, he would act out the parts of the various protagonists. He would get so involved in the

narratives, he would often start crying when he came to a particularly moving part of the story.

jd: So the impression of him being silent is not really true?

DG: He *was* silent for much of the day. He told people that he preferred to remain in silence, but he did speak, often for hours at a time, when he was in the mood.

I'm not saying that everyone who came to see him got a prompt verbal answer to his or her question. You could come and ask an apparently earnest question, and Bhagavan might ignore you. He might stare out of the window and show no sign that he had even heard what you had said. Someone else might come in and ask a question and get an immediate reply. It sometimes looked like a bit of a lottery, but everyone in the end got what they needed or deserved. Bhagavan responded to what was going on in the minds of the people who were in front of him, not just to their questions, and since he was the only person who could see what was going on in that sphere, his responses at times seemed to outsiders to be occasionally random or arbitrary.

Many people would ask something and not get a spoken answer, but they would find later that merely sitting in his presence had given them the peace or the answer they required. This was the kind of response that Bhagavan preferred to make: a silent, healing stream of grace that gave people peace, not just a satisfactory spoken answer.

jd: When did he begin to give out teachings, and what were they? I have been told that when he was living in a cave on the hill someone came to him and asked what his teachings were. He apparently wrote them out in a small booklet. Can you say something about this?

DG: This was 1901. He didn't even have a notebook. A man called Sivaprakasam Pillai came and asked questions. His basic question was 'Who am I? How do I find out who I really am?' The dialogue developed from there, but no words were spoken. Bhagavan wrote his answers with his finger in the sand because this was the period in which he found it difficult to articulate sounds. This primitive writing medium produced short, pithy answers.

Sivaprakasam Pillai didn't write down these answers. After each new question was asked, Bhagavan would wipe out his previous reply and pen a new one with his finger. When he went home, Sivaprakasam Pillai wrote down what he could remember of this silent conversation.

About twenty years later he published these questions and answers as an appendix to a brief biography of Bhagavan that he had written and published. I think there were thirteen questions and answers in this first published version. Bhagavan's devotees appreciated this particular presentation. Ramanashram published it as a separate booklet, and with each edition more and more questions and answers were added. The longest version has about thirty.

At some point in the 1920s Bhagavan himself rewrote this series of questions and answers as a prose essay, elaborating on



Sivaprakasam Pillai

some answers and deleting others. This is now published under the title *Who Am I?* in Bhagavan's *Collected Works*, and separately as a small pamphlet. It is simply Bhagavan's summary of answers written with his finger more than twenty years before.

jd: It sounds fairly brief.

DG: Yes, it is probably about six pages in most books.

jd: The key is this question 'Who am I?' Is that right?

DG: It's called *Who am I?* but it covers all kinds of things: the nature of happiness, what the world is, how it apparently comes into existence, how it disappears. There is also a detailed portion that explains how to do self-enquiry.

jd: You could say something on that. I've personally been reading about self-enquiry for many years but it's never quite clear exactly what it is. Is it something you do in the morning as a practice? Is it something you do once or regularly? Is it like a breathing technique or a type of meditation?



Papaji

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DG: Papaji always used to say 'Do it once and do it properly'. That's the ideal way, but I only know of two or three people who have done it once and got the right answer: a direct experience of the Self. These people were ready for a direct experience, so when they asked the question, the Self responded with the right answer, the right experience.

jd: Like Papaji himself?

DG: Papaji never did self-enquiry, although he did advocate it vigorously once he started teaching.

I'm thinking of two remarkable people who both came to Bhagavan in the late 1940s. One was a woman who had had many visions of Murugan, her chosen deity. She was a devotee who had never heard of self-enquiry. She didn't even know much about Bhagavan when she stood in front of him in April 1950. She was one of the people who had 'walking *darshan*' in Bhagavan's final days. As she stood in front of Bhagavan, the question 'Who am I?' spontaneously appeared inside her, and as an answer she immediately had a direct experience of the Self. She said later that this was the first time in her life that she had experienced *Brahman*.

The second person I am thinking of is Lakshmana Swamy. He, too, had not done any self-enquiry before. He had been a devotee for only a few months and during that time he had been repeating Bhagavan's name as a spiritual practice. In October 1949 he sat in Bhagavan's presence and closed his eyes. The question 'Who am I?' spontaneously appeared inside him, and as an answer his mind went back to its source, the Heart, and never appeared again. In his case it was a permanent experience, a true Self-realization.

In both cases there had been no prior practice of self-enquiry, and in both cases the question 'Who am I?' appeared spontaneously within them. It wasn't asked with volition. These people were ready for an experience of the Self. In Bhagavan's

presence the question appeared within them, and in his presence their sense of individuality vanished. In my opinion being in the physical presence was just as important as the asking of the question.

Many other people have asked the question endlessly without getting the result that these people got from having the question appear in them once.

I should also like to point out that both these people had their experiences in the last few months of Bhagavan's life. Though his body was disintegrating, physically enfeebling him, his spiritual power, his physical presence, remained just as strong as ever.

jd: Are you saying that self-enquiry is not a practice, that it is not something that we should do laboriously, hour after hour, day after day?

DG: It is a practice for the vast majority of people, and Bhagavan did encourage people to do it as often as they could. He said that the practice should be persisted with, right up to the moment of realization.

It wasn't his only teaching, and he didn't tell everyone who came to him to do it. Generally, when people approached him and asked for spiritual advice, he would ask them what practice they were doing. They would tell him, and his usual response would be, 'Very good, carry on with that'.

He didn't have a strong missionary zeal for self-enquiry, but he did say that sooner or later everyone has to come to self-enquiry because this is the only effective way of eliminating the individual 'I'. He knew that most people who approached him preferred to repeat the name of God or worship a particular form of him. So, he let them carry on with whatever practice they felt an affinity with.

However, if you came to him and asked, 'I'm not doing any practice at the moment, but I want to get enlightened. What is the quickest and most direct way to accomplish this?' he would almost invariably reply, 'Do self-enquiry'.

jd: Is he on the record as saying that it is the quickest and most direct way?

DG: Yes. He mentioned this on many occasions, but it was not his style to force it on people. He wanted devotees to come to it when they were ready for it.

jd: So even though he accepted whatever practices people were involved in, he was quite clear the quickest and most direct tool would be self-enquiry?

DG: Yes, and he also said that you had to stick with it right up to the moment of realization.

For Bhagavan, it wasn't a technique that you practiced for an hour a day, sitting cross-legged on the floor. It is something you should do every waking moment, in combination with whatever actions the body is doing.

He said that beginners could start by doing it sitting, with closed eyes, but for everyone else, he expected it to be done

during ordinary daily activities.

jd: With regard to the actual technique, would you say that it is to be aware, from moment to moment, what is going on in the mind?

DG: No, it's nothing to do with being aware of the contents of the mind. It's a very specific method that aims to find out where the individual sense of 'I' arises. Self-enquiry is an active investigation, not a passive witnessing.

For example, you may be thinking about what you had for breakfast, or you may be looking at a tree in the garden. In self-enquiry, you don't simply maintain an awareness of these thoughts, you put your attention on the thinker who has the thought, the perceiver who has the perception. There is an 'I' who thinks, an 'I' who perceives, and this 'I' is also a thought. Bhagavan's advice was to focus on this inner sense of 'I' in order to find out what it really is. In self-enquiry you are trying to find out where this 'I' feeling arises, to go back to that place and stay there. It is not simply watching, it's a kind of active scrutiny in which one is trying to find out how the sense of being an individual person comes into being.

You can investigate the nature of this 'I' by formally asking yourself, 'Who am I?' or 'Where does this "I" come from?' Alternatively, you can try to maintain a continuous awareness of this inner feeling of 'I'. Either approach would count as self-enquiry. You should not suggest answers to the question, such as 'I am consciousness' because any answer you give yourself is conceptual rather than experiential. The only correct answer is a direct experience of the Self.

jd: It's very clear what you just said, but almost impossible to accomplish. It sounds simple, but I know from my own experience that it's very hard.

DG: It needs practice and commitment. You have to keep at it and not give up. The practice slowly changes the habits of the mind. By doing this practice regularly and continuously, you remove your focus from superficial streams of thoughts and relocate it at the place where thought itself begins to manifest. In that latter place you begin to experience the peace and stillness of the Self, and that gives you the incentive to continue.

Bhagavan had a very appropriate analogy for this process. Imagine that you have a bull, and that you keep it in a stable. If you leave the door open, the bull will wander out, looking for food. It may find food, but a lot of the time it will get into trouble by grazing in cultivated fields. The owners of these fields will beat it with sticks and throw stones at it to chase it away, but it will come back again and again, and suffer repeatedly, because it doesn't understand the notion of field boundaries. It is just programmed to look for food and to eat it wherever it finds something edible.

The bull is the mind, the stable is the Heart where it arises and to where it returns, and the grazing in the fields represents the mind's painful addiction to seeking pleasure in outside objects.

Bhagavan said that most mind-control techniques forcibly

restrain the bull to stop it moving around, but they don't do anything about the bull's fundamental desire to wander and get itself into trouble.

You can tie up the mind temporarily with *japa* or breath control, but when these restraints are loosened, the mind just wanders off again, gets involved in more mischief and suffers again. You can tie up a bull, but it won't like it. You will just end up with an angry, cantankerous bull that will probably be looking for a chance to commit some act of violence on you.

Bhagavan likened self-enquiry to holding a bunch of fresh grass under the bull's nose. As the bull approaches it, you move away in the direction of the stable door and the bull follows you. You lead it back into the stable, and it voluntarily follows you because it wants the pleasure of eating the grass that you are holding in front of it. Once it is inside the stable, you allow it to eat the abundant grass that is always stored there. The door of the stable is always left open, and the bull is free to leave and roam about at any time. There is no punishment or restraint. The bull will go out repeatedly, because it is the nature of such animals to wander in search of food. And each time they go out, they will be punished for straying into forbidden areas.

Every time you notice that your bull has wandered out, tempt it back into its stable with the same technique. Don't try to beat it into submission, or you may be attacked yourself, and don't try to solve the problem forcibly by locking it up.

Sooner or later even the dimmest of bulls will understand that, since there is a perpetual supply of tasty food in the stable, there is no point wandering around outside, because that always leads to sufferings and punishments. Even though the stable door is always open, the bull will eventually stay inside and enjoy the food that is always there. This is self-enquiry.

Whenever you find the mind wandering around in external objects and senses perceptions, take it back to its stable, which is the Heart, the source from which it rises and to which it returns. In that place it can enjoy the peace and bliss of the Self. When it wanders around outside, looking for pleasure and happiness, it just gets into trouble, but when it stays at home in the Heart, it enjoys peace and silence. Eventually, even though the stable door is always open, the mind will choose to stay at home and not wander about.

Bhagavan said that the way of restraint was the way of the yogi. Yogis try to achieve restraint by forcing the mind to be still. Self-enquiry gives the mind the option of wandering wherever it wants to, and it achieves its success by gently persuading the mind that it will always be happier staying at home.

jd: In that very moment when you realize there's plenty of grass at home and therefore no need to go out, would you call that awakening?

DG: No, I would just call it understanding.

Next: [The whole purpose of his reply was to make you turn inward, to make you see the light of truth within yourself.](#)

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jd: That's only understanding? Surely, once you've perceived that there are piles of grass at home, why would you want to go out again?

* * * * *

DG: The notion of being better off at home belongs to the 'I', and that 'I' has to go before realization can happen.

Let's pursue this analogy a little more. What I will say now is not part of Bhagavan's original analogy, but it does incorporate other parts of his teaching.

For realization, for a true and permanent awakening, the bull has to die. While it is alive, and while the door is still open, there is always the possibility that it will stray. If it dies, though, it can never be tempted outside again. In realization, the mind is dead. It is not a state in which the mind is simply experiencing the peace of the Self.

When the mind goes voluntarily into the Heart and stays there, feeling no urge whatsoever to jump out again, the Self destroys it, and Self alone remains.

This is a key part of Bhagavan's teachings: the Self can only destroy the mind when the mind no longer has any tendency to move outwards. While those outward-moving tendencies are still present, even in a latent form, the mind will always be too strong for the Self to dissolve it completely.

This is why Bhagavan's way works and the forcible-restraint way doesn't. You can keep the mind restrained for decades, but such a mind will never be consumed by the Self because the desires, the tendencies, the *vasanas*, are still there. They may not be manifesting, but they are still there.

Ultimately, it is the grace or power of the Self that eliminates the final vestiges of the desire-free mind. The mind cannot eliminate itself, but it can offer itself up as a sacrifice to the Self. Through effort, through enquiry, one can take the mind back to the Self and keep it there in a desire-free state. However, mind can't do anything more than that. In that final moment it is the power of the Self within that pulls the last remains of the mind back into itself and eliminates it completely.

jd: You say that in realization the mind is dead. People who are enlightened seem to think, remember, and so on, in the just the same way that ordinary people do. They must have a mind to do this. Perhaps they are not attached to it, but it must still be there otherwise they couldn't function in the world. Someone who had a dead mind would be a zombie.

DG: This is a misconception that many people have because they can't imagine how anyone can function, take decisions, speak, and so on without a mind. You do all these things with your mind, or at least you think you do, so when you see a sage behaving normally in the world, you automatically assume that he too is coordinating all his activities through an entity called 'mind'.

You think you are a person inhabiting a body, so when you look

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at a sage you automatically assume that he too is a person functioning through a body. The sage doesn't see himself that way at all. He knows that the Self alone exists, that a body appears in that Self and performs certain actions. He knows that all the actions and words that arise in this body come from the Self alone. He doesn't make the mistake of attributing them to an imaginary intermediary entity called 'mind'. In this mindless state, no one is organizing mental information, no one is deciding what to do next. The Self merely prompts the body to do or say whatever needs to be done or said in that moment.

When the mind has gone, leaving only the Self, the one who decides future courses of actions has gone, the performer of actions has gone, the thinker of thoughts has gone, the perceiver of perceptions has gone. Self alone remains, and that Self takes care of all the things that the body needs to say or do. Someone who is in that state always does the most appropriate thing, always says the most appropriate thing, because all the words and all the actions come directly from the Self.

Bhagavan once compared himself to a radio. A voice is coming out of it, saying sensible things that seem to be a product of rational, considered thought, but if you open the radio, there is no one in there thinking and deciding.

When you listen to a sage such as Bhagavan, you are not listening to words that come from a mind, you are listening to words that come directly from the Self. In his written works Bhagavan uses the term *manonasa* to describe the state of liberation. It means, quite unequivocally, 'destroyed mind'.

The mind, according to Bhagavan, is just a wrong idea, a mistaken belief. It comes into existence when the 'I'-thought, the sense of individuality, claims ownership of all the thoughts and perceptions that the brain processes. When this happens, you end up with a mind that says, 'I am happy' or 'I have a problem' or 'I see that tree over there'.

When, through self-enquiry, the mind is dissolved in its source there is an understanding that the mind never really existed, that it was just an erroneous idea that was believed in simply because its true nature and origin were never properly investigated. Bhagavan sometimes compared the mind to a gatecrasher at a wedding who causes trouble and gets away with it because the bride's party thinks he is with the bridegroom and vice versa. The mind doesn't belong to either the Self or the body. It's just an interloper that causes trouble because we never take the trouble to find out where it has come from. When we make that investigation, mind, like the troublesome wedding guest, just melts away and disappears.

Let me give you a beautiful description of how Bhagavan spoke. It comes from part three of [*The Power of the Presence*](#). It was written by G. V. Subbaramayya, a devotee who had intimate contact with Bhagavan. It illustrates very well my thesis that the words of a sage come from the Self, not from a mind:

Sri Bhagavan's manner of speaking was itself unique. His normal state was silence. He spoke so little, casual visitors who only saw him for a short while wondered whether he ever spoke. To put questions to him and to elicit his replies was an art in itself that required an unusual exercise in self-control. A sincere doubt, an earnest question submitted to him never went without an

answer, though sometimes his silence itself was the best answer to particular questions. A questioner needed to be able to wait patiently. To have the maximum chance of receiving a good answer, you had to put your question simply and briefly. Then you had to remain quiet and attentive. Sri Bhagavan would take his time and then begin slowly and haltingly to speak. As his speech continued, it would gather momentum. It would be like a drizzle gradually strengthening into a shower. Sometimes it might go on for hours together, holding the audience spellbound. But throughout the talk you had to keep completely still and not butt in with counter remarks. Any interruption from you would break the thread of his discourse and he would at once resume silence. He would never enter into a discussion, nor would he argue with anyone. The fact was, what he spoke was not a view or an opinion but the direct emanation of light from within that manifested as words in order to dispel the darkness of ignorance. The whole purpose of his reply was to make you turn inward, to make you see the light of truth within yourself.

jd: Can we go back to the analogy of the bull that has to be enticed back into its stable? It seems the bull, which represents the mind, has to die. When the mind dies, can this considered to be a full awakening? Is there a difference between awakening and enlightenment? Obviously, we're just using words, but are there two different states?

DG: Self is always the same. Self being aware of the Self is always the same. Different levels of experiences belong to the mind, not the Self.

Mind can be temporarily suspended, having been replaced by what appears to be a direct experience of the Self. Nevertheless, this is not the *sahaja* state, the permanent natural state in which the mind can never rise again. These temporary states are very subtle experiences of the mind. The bliss and peace of the Self are being experienced, being mediated through an 'I' that has not yet been fully eliminated.

For example, I experience being in this room. I mediate it through my senses, through my knowledge, my memory. When the 'I' goes back into the Heart and remains still without rising, there, in that state, it experiences the emanations of the Self; the quietness, the peace, the bliss.

This is still an experience, and as such, it is not enlightenment. It's not the full awareness of the Self. That full awareness is only there when there is no 'I' that mediates it. The experiences of the Self that happen when the 'I' is still existing may be regarded as a 'preview of forthcoming attractions', like the trailers for next week's movie, but they are not the final, irreversible state. They come and they go, and when they go, mind returns with all its usual, annoying vigour.

jd: How does one progress from these temporary experiences to a permanent one? Is keeping still enough, or is grace required?

DG: I would like to bring in Lakshmana Swamy again at this point. I mentioned him earlier as being an example of someone who realized the Self in Bhagavan's presence through the practice of self-enquiry. So, we are dealing with an expert here; someone who knows what he is talking about.

Lakshmana Swamy is quite clear on this point. He says that devotees can, by their own effort, reach what he calls 'the effortless thought-free state'. That's as far as you can go by yourself. In that state there are no more thoughts, desires or memories rising up. They are not being suppressed; they simply don't rise up any more to grab your attention.

Lakshmana Swamy says that if you reach that state through your own intense efforts and then go and sit in the presence of a realized being, the power of the Self will make the residual 'I' go back to its source where it will die and never rise again. This is the complete and full realization. This is the role of the Guru, who is identical with the Self within: to pull the desire-free mind into the Heart and destroy it completely.

As I mentioned before, this won't happen if the desires and tendencies of the mind are still latent. They all have to go before this final act of execution can be achieved. The disciple himself has to remove all the unwanted lumber from his mental attic, and he also needs to be in a state in which there is no desire to put anything more into it. The Guru cannot do this work for him; he has to do it himself. When this has been accomplished, the power of the Self within, the inner Guru, will complete the work.

jd: We've both had this common experience of living around Papaji, and we have both heard him say to people 'You've got it!' Was he referring to that first temporary state or the second, final irrevocable state?

DG: I would say almost invariably the first. His particular knack, his talent, his skill was to completely pull the mental chair out from underneath you. He would somehow, instantaneously, disentangle you from the superstructure, the infrastructure of the mind, and you would fall - Plop! - right into the Self. You would then immediately think, 'This is great! This is wonderful! I'm enlightened!'

He had this astonishing talent, this power of being able to rub your nose in the reality of the Self. It was completely spontaneous because most of the time he wasn't even aware that he was doing it. Somehow, in his presence people lost this sense of functioning through the individual 'I'. When this happened you would be completely immersed in the feeling, the knowledge of being the Self. However, it wouldn't stick for the reasons I have already given. If you haven't cleared out all the lumber from your mental attic, these experiences will be temporary. Sooner or later the mind will reassert itself and this apparent experience of the Self will fade away. It might last ten days, ten weeks, ten months or even years, but then it goes away and just leaves a memory.

jd: Does that mean that this second final state is very, very, very rare?

DG: In the *Bhagavad Gita* Krishna says, 'Out of every thousand people one is really serious, and out of every thousand serious people only one knows me as I really am'.

That's one in a million, and I think that's a very generous estimate. Personally, I think it's far fewer than that.

jd: This bring us to the subject of your recent series of books. In these books you have chosen people who were close to Bhagavan. Presumably, you chose people who you feel have reached that final state.

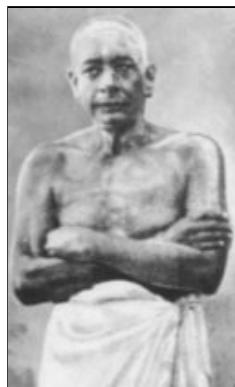
DG: No, that wasn't the criterion at all. Initially, my aim was to bring into the public domain accounts by devotees of Bhagavan that hadn't been published before in English. I make no judgments about spiritual maturity or accomplishments. My prime consideration was 'Has this been published before in English, and if it hasn't, is it interesting enough to print now?'

jd: So you don't in any way suggest in the book that they've reached this or that state?

DG: I let people speak for themselves.

The second chapter of part one of [*The Power of the Presence*](#), for example, is about a man, Sivaprakasam Pillai, who spent fifty years with Bhagavan. I have already mentioned him; he was the person who recorded the answers that Bhagavan wrote in the sand in 1901. In many parts of this chapter he's lamenting 'I've wasted my life', 'I'm worse than a dog', 'I've sat here for many years without making any progress'.

jd: But this man might have got it in that period, even if he thinks he didn't.



Sivaprakasam Pillai

DG: In Bhagavan's day there was a daily chanting of Tamil devotional poetry. There was a fixed selection of material that took fifteen days to go through. Sivapraksam Pillai's poems were part of this cycle. Every fifteen days the devotees would sit in front of Bhagavan and chant 'I am worse than a dog,' and so on.

Somebody asked Bhagavan, 'This man has been here fifty years and he is still in this state. What hope is there for us?'

Bhagavan replied, 'That's his way of praising me'.

When Sivaprakasam Pillai died Bhagavan commented, 'Sivaprakasam has become the light of Siva'.

Prakasam means 'light', so this was a pun on his name.

jd: This suggests that he had achieved this second, final state.

DG: Bhagavan himself only gave public 'certificates of enlightenment' to his mother and the cow, Lakshmi. He did indirectly hint that other people had reached this state, but he would never name the names. He only named those two after they died.



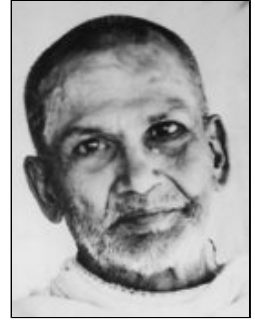
*Patting Lakshmi
the cow*
(Click on image to
enlarge)



*Lakshmi's samadhi on the right;
other animal samadhis are on the left. (Click on image to enlarge)*



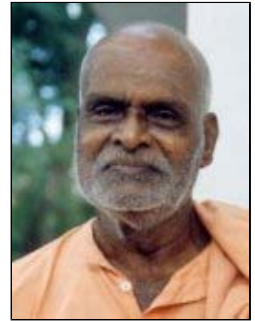
*The stone statue of Lakshmi erected
over her samadhi (Click on image to enlarge)*



Muruganar

jd: Let me ask this question differently. In the collective consciousness of the ashram and the people who are associated with it, are there certain people who, somehow, everyone agrees on? Are there people that everyone accepts as enlightened, even though Bhagavan didn't publicly acknowledge their state?

DG: You'll never get everybody to agree on anything around here, but probably the most widely revered was Muruganar. He's an obvious candidate because right from the 1920s onwards he was writing Tamil poetry that spoke of his own realization. He wrote more than 20,000 verses, and in a large number of them he was declaring his enlightenment. Many of these were published in Bhagavan's lifetime, and Bhagavan made no attempt to discourage the notion that these were true accounts. Bhagavan often read out extracts from these books, and this convinced many people that the contents must have been true.

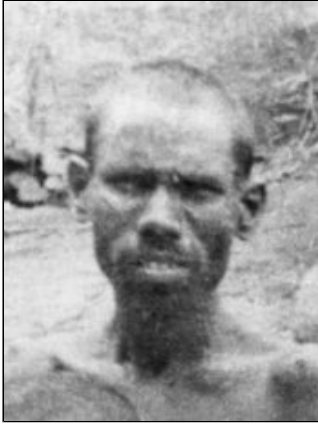


Kunju Swami

jd: Are there some other candidates that Bhagavan himself seems to acknowledge?

DG: There's a very interesting 'back door'. Both his mother and Lakshmi the cow were given traditional burial rites that are reserved, according to an ancient Tamil scripture, for enlightened beings. During Bhagavan's lifetime only one other devotee was buried in this way: a Muslim man called Mastan who passed away in 1931. He is relatively unknown, but when he died Bhagavan immediately sent Kunju Swami to his village, which is about forty miles away, with instructions to build the kind of shrine that he ordered when his mother died.

I would take this to be a very strong but indirect endorsement of this man's state.



Mastan

Next: [Nothing arises in him that says, 'I must do this, I must be like this'.](#)

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jd: There are many people nowadays who travel around the world giving satsang. Many of them place themselves in Bhagavan's lineage. Would you like to say anything about this?

* * * * *

DG: First of all, Bhagavan never authorized anybody to teach, so anyone who claims they've got Bhagavan's permission to teach isn't telling the truth. People might claim they are in the Ramana Maharshi lineage, which means that Bhagavan is their Guru or their Guru's Guru. I don't necessarily think that this gives people authority to teach. Authority to teach can come from someone who has realized the Self, and it can also come from the Self within. It was the power of the Self that gave Bhagavan himself the authority to speak and teach. No human teacher gave him that authority.

Papaji used to say, 'If you are destined to be a Guru, the Self within will give you the power to do the work. That authority doesn't come from anywhere else, or anyone else.' Papaji told me once that Arunachala gave Bhagavan the power and authority to be a *Sadguru*. I think most people would agree with that.

Bhagavan was never authorized to teach by a human Guru, because he didn't have one. In fact, I don't think Bhagavan particularly wanted to be a teacher. In his early years on the hill he tried to run away from his devotees on three occasions, but he never got very far because he was severely limited by his love of Arunachala. There's a limit to how well you can hide yourself on Arunachala. If you are willing to run away to the Himalayas you can get away with it, but if you are just dodging from rock to rock in Tiruvannamalai, people will catch up with you sooner or later. After the third unsuccessful attempt, Bhagavan realized that it was his destiny to have people around and to teach them.

jd: Can we go back to the story of Bhagavan's life? I have been very struck by the stories about his final days. He had a small cancer on his arm, which could have been easily treated by western medicine, but he never gave it much interest.

DG: He did receive the best western medical treatment. He had four operations, which were all done by very competent surgeons, but it was a malignant growth that kept coming back. The only thing that might have cured him was amputation. He drew the line at that and refused to have his arm amputated.

You shouldn't get the impression, though, that he wanted all this treatment. Whenever he was asked what should be done, his reply was 'Let nature take its course'.

The doctors were brought by the ashram authorities and by devotees who didn't want to see him suffering. Bhagavan accepted all their treatments, not because he felt that he needed to be cured, but because the various treatments were offered as acts of devotion. Allopaths, homeopaths, ayurvedic doctors, nature cure experts and herbalists all came, and he accepted all their treatments. He didn't really have much interest in whether they succeeded or not because there was nothing left in him that could say 'I want this to happen,'

In this page:

[In a sense that is how he lived his whole life. He basically let his whole life happen.](#)

[Is there anything else you'd like to say that somehow summarizes what we've been talking about?](#)

* * * * *



*A bandaged
Bhagavan in the
Nirvana Room
(Click on image to
enlarge)*

or 'I don't want this'. He let everyone, one by one, play with his body. He let the surgeons cut him open; he let the herbalists put poultices on.

jd: In a sense that is how he lived his whole life. He basically let his whole life happen.

DG: Yes. He probably knew better than the doctors what would work for him and what would not, but he didn't interfere. He let then do whatever they wanted to do. There's one story from his final days that I really like. Some village herbalist came along and made a concoction of leaves and put it on his arm. The high-powered allopaths were horrified. They thought they were losing valuable time as this bundle of leaves was sitting on Bhagavan's arm. Finally, they ganged up on this man and compelled the ashram manager to take the poultice off so they could get back to work with their scalpels. Even though Bhagavan had agreed to have this poultice on, he accepted the decision to take it off.

I have already said that Bhagavan didn't like to waste anything. He took the poultice off himself and put it on the neck of somebody who had a cancerous growth there and said, 'Well, let's see if it does you any good'.

That person got better and Bhagavan died.

jd: In a way his whole life was a living example of total surrender to 'life taking its course'. It seems to me that this is a message that doesn't always come through because it's the 'self-enquiry' that is connected to his name.

DG: I think the key word to understanding Bhagavan's behaviour is a Sanskrit term, *sankalpa*, which means 'will' or 'intention'. It means the resolve to follow a particular course of action or a decision to do something. That is a *sankalpa*. Bhagavan has said that this is what separates the enlightened being from the unenlightened.

He said unenlightened people are always full of *sankalpas*, full of decisions about what they're going to do next: how they are going to plan their lives; how they are going to change their current circumstances to benefit themselves the most in the long or the short-term future.

Bhagavan maintained that the true *jnani* has no desire whatsoever to accomplish anything in this world. Nothing arises in him that says, 'I must do this, I must be like this'.

The title of my book [*The Power of the Presence*](#) actually came from an answer on this topic. I will read you what I wrote:

Narayana Iyer once had a most illuminating exchange with Bhagavan on this topic, an exchange that gave a rare insight into the way that a *jnani*'s power functions: '

One day when I was sitting by the side of Bhagavan I felt so miserable that I put the following question to him: "Is the *sankalpa* of the *jnani* not capable of warding off the destinies of the devotees?"

'Bhagavan smiled and said: "Does the *jnani* have a *sankalpa* at all? The *jivanmukta* [liberated being] can have no *sankalpas* whatsoever. It is just impossible."

I continued: "Then what is the fate of all us who pray

to you to have grace on us and save us? Will we not be benefited or saved by sitting in front of you, or by coming to you? "

'Bhagavan turned graciously to me and said: " a person's bad karma will be considerably reduced while he is in the presence of a *jnani*. A *jnani* has no *sankalpas* but his *sannidhi* [presence] is the most powerful force. He need not have *sankalpa*, but his presiding presence, the most powerful force, can do wonders: save souls, give peace of mind, even give liberation to ripe souls. Your prayers are not answered by him but absorbed by his presence. His presence saves you, wards off the karma and gives you the boons as the case may be, [but] involuntarily. The *jnani* does save the devotees, but not by *sankalpa*, which is non-existent in him, only through his presiding presence, his *sannidhi*."

jd: Is that what the Dalai Lama and the Buddhists call 'compassion'?

DG: I don't know enough about Buddhism to comment on that.

'No *sankalpas*' means that in an enlightened being there are no feelings or thoughts such as, 'I must help this person', 'this person needs to be helped', or 'this situation needs to be changed'. Everything is totally OK as it is. By abiding in that state, somehow an energy, a presence, is created that takes care of all the incoming problems.

It's like a desk in the outer office. All the incoming requests are processed, and processed very efficiently, in the outer office. The door to the inner office is closed, and behind it the *jnani* sits at his desk all day doing absolutely nothing. However, by abiding in his natural state the energy is created that somehow deals with all the requests that come in. The *jnani* needs to be there in the inner office, just being himself, because if he wasn't there, the outer office wouldn't be able to function at all.

jd: That would reinforce the time-honored idea that you have to go and sit with an enlightened one.

DG: I agree, but such people are hard to find. In my opinion there are very few of them.

jd: Well, I think your opinion has some authority because you have been living here for about twenty years.

DG: Twenty-five years.

jd: In those twenty-five years you have met many people who were with Bhagavan. You have an unusual, analytic way of looking at things; you have had your own practice here, and you have served several teachers in this lineage. That should be enough to give you some authority to talk about these things.

DG: I have opinions, but I am not an authority. Don't try to make me into one. You can find many people who have been here twenty-five years or more, and none of them agrees with me. You

are quite free to go and listen to them and believe anything they have to say.

jd: Is there anything else you'd like to say that somehow summarizes what we've been talking about?

DG: Find a teacher whose mind is dead and spend as much time as possible in his or her presence. That's my advice to everyone who is serious about enlightenment.

jd: That's interesting. We met a teacher in Rishikesh who basically said the same thing. He said, 'You have to find a Guru'.

DG: There is a limit to what you can accomplish by yourself. Sitting in the presence of a true Guru will always do you more good than meditating by yourself. I am not saying that meditation is not useful. Intense meditation will purify the mind and it may lead you to a competent Guru, but being with a Guru is like freewheeling down a hill on a bike instead of pedaling uphill.

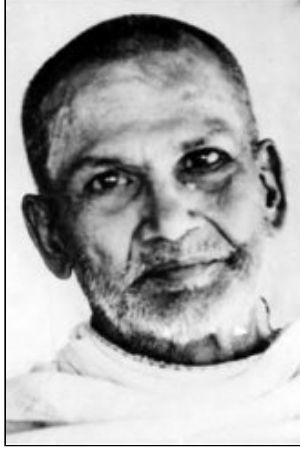
Papaji had an interesting notion. He said that if you meditate intensively enough, you will accumulate the *punyas*, which are spiritual brownie points, that somehow earn you the right to sit in the presence of a realized being. However, he said that once you had entered the presence of a realized being, it was more productive to sit quietly and not make any effort at all. When you sit in the presence of such a being, it is the power of the Self coming off and through that person that makes you progress further, not anything you do there.

I think Bhagavan would agree with this. He once told one of his devotees, 'Just keep quiet. Bhagavan will do the rest.'

jd: Thank you.

Guru Vachaka Kovai
(The Garland of the Guru's Sayings)

by Muruganar



Sri Muruganar

In the late 1920s Muruganar, an accomplished Tamil poet who had lived with Bhagavan for several years, began to collect the verbal teachings of his Guru, Ramana Maharshi. He recorded them in four-line Tamil verses. No questions were recorded, just the answers and statements on a wide variety of spiritual topics. By the late 1930s, Muruganar had completed over 800 of these verses, virtually all of which recorded a direct teaching statement that Bhagavan had uttered. In 1939 a decision was made to publish these teachings in book form. Bhagavan then asked Sadhu Natanananda, a Tamil scholar and devotee, to arrange the verses by subjects since there was no particular order or sequence in the material that Muruganar had amassed. After Natanananda had done this work and shown it to Bhagavan, Bhagavan himself thoroughly edited the work, modifying the sequences and adding many revisions. In addition to making these textual corrections, Bhagavan also composed new verses that he added at appropriate places in the text. Because of the care and attention that Bhagavan put into checking and revising these verses, we can be sure that their contents have his full approval.

Many of Bhagavan's verbal teachings were recorded during his lifetime, but few of them were reviewed and edited by him. *Guru Vachaka Kovai* is the biggest collection of Bhagavan's spoken teachings that was thoroughly checked and revised by him during his lifetime. As such it has a unique place in the Ramana literature.

A second edition of the Tamil work was brought out in 1971. This contained many additional verses that Muruganar had composed since the first edition of the book came out in 1939. This new edition of the work contained a total of 1,284 verses, 1,254 composed by Muruganar and the remaining twenty-eight by Bhagavan himself.

Muruganar passed away in 1973. In 1980 Sadhu Om, Muruganar's literary executor, brought out a new edition of *Guru Vachaka Kovai* in which he rendered the original Tamil verses (which are often very difficult to decipher unless one has a good knowledge of Tamil literary conventions) into Tamil prose. He also

added explanatory comments to many of the prose renderings. This book is the basis of the version I am including on this site.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s [Michael James](#) and Sadhu Om worked together on a translation of *Guru Vachaka Kovai*. Although all the verses were translated, along with many of the commentaries, the work was never published since Michael was not satisfied with the accuracy of some of the verses. In a conversation I had with him many years ago he told me that he wanted to revise many of the early verses since he felt that some of them were somewhat loose paraphrases of the text, rather than literal translations.

After Sadhu Om passed away in 1984, Michael suspended work on his translation of *Guru Vachaka Kovai* and switched his attention to other projects, such as bringing out the unpublished works of Muruganar and Sadhu Om. His manuscript of *Guru Vachaka Kovai* has therefore not been revised for almost twenty years.

Over the years I have shown Michael James' and Sadhu Om's version of *Guru Vachaka Kovai* to several people, and everyone has appreciated its rigorous literalness. Only one version of *Guru Vachaka Kovai* has ever appeared in English before, the one by Professor Swaminathan that was initially serialised in *The Mountain Path* and later published by Sri Ramanasramam. Professor Swaminathan's version attempted to retain the poetic element of the original, but in many places this resulted in a diminution of accuracy. Sadhu Om and Michael James decided that, since the verses recorded philosophical statements by Bhagavan, a literal translation would be of more interest to readers and devotees since an accurate rendering would fully reveal all the nuances of Bhagavan's teachings on many different subjects.

A few months ago I asked Michael if I could post his translation on my site since it appeared very unlikely that he would get round to making a final version in the near future. Michael agreed and asked that it be billed as a 'work in progress', not a completed work. I wish here to express my gratitude and appreciation to Michael for allowing this incomplete work to be given a public airing.

The manuscript I worked with had many oddities and rough edges, most of which I have left untouched. I don't want to impose my own editorial red pencil on Michael's endeavours; I just want to express a wish that he one day complete the work and bring out a final, definitive version. I have, however, standardized some of the spellings and added attributions to the notes that follow many of the verses. Both Muruganar and Sadhu Om have written commentaries on *Guru Vachaka Kovai*. When these have been utilized, I have added the appropriate names at the top of the notes. When there are no published Tamil sources for the notes, I have attributed them to Michael James. However, since Michael worked closely with Sadhu Om as he was preparing these notes, I think it is safe to say that most of them represent supplementary verbal comments by Sadhu Om that Michael added in order to clarify the original text.

Finally, Michael wishes to make it known that anyone is free to use this material. However, this does not mean that he is giving away any of the rights to this work. He intends to complete the editorial work one day and to bring out his own edition of the work.

I am posting the first third of the work today. The remainder will

be added in installments over the next few months.

The verses 1-501 are split into 4 PDF documents:

1. [Guru Vachaka Kovai 1-153](#) (Verses 1 through 153)
2. [Guru Vachaka Kovai 154-265](#) (Verses 154 through 265)
3. [Guru Vachaka Kovai 266-383](#) (Verses 266 through 383)
4. [Guru Vachaka Kovai 384-501](#) (Verses 384 through 501)

Guru Vachaka Kovai Part II

5. [Guru Vachaka Kovai 502-877](#) (Verses 502 through 877)

Guru Vachaka Kovai Part III

6. [Guru Vachaka Kovai 878-1254](#) (Verses 878 through 1254)



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Sri Ramana Paravidyopanishad

In the late 1920s Lakshman Sarma had the rare privilege of having private lessons from Bhagavan. Their subject was the philosophy and practical teachings expounded by Bhagavan in *Ulladu Narpadu*. Lakshman Sarma subsequently summarised the essence of these lessons in two works: his Tamil commentary on *Ulladu Narpadu* and *Revelation*, his expanded Sanskrit rendering of the original *Ulladu Narpadu* verses. In the 1930s Bhagavan remarked that Lakshman Sarma's commentary on *Ulladu Narpadu* was the best available on that work. In the late 1930s Lakshman Sarma put many of these ideas and explanations into *Maha Yoga*, his English presentation of Bhagavan's teachings.

In the 1950s Lakshman Sarma made a further attempt to explain and summarise Bhagavan's teachings. He composed a Sanskrit work of over 700 verses, entitling it *Sri Ramana Paravidyopanishad*. This work was serialised in *The Call Divine*, a Bombay magazine that regularly featured articles by Bhagavan's devotees. The material was never published in book form, although I have been told that Lakshman Sarma's family are now looking into the possibility of publishing the whole work. I should like to thank Lakshman Sarma's grandson, Vijay Sarma, for permission to post this version of the work here on this site.

The text I am giving here is an edited version of the English text that appeared in the 1950s serialisation. I have omitted the Sanskrit and revised the remaining English translation by Lakshman Sarma since his English style in this work style was at times very eccentric. The square brackets in the translations of the verses were mostly put there by Lakshman Sarma in order to expand and clarify the original Sanskrit, which was occasionally terse and sutra-like. The intervening comments, which feature in coloured italics, are his own comments and explanations. My own comments appear in the footnotes.

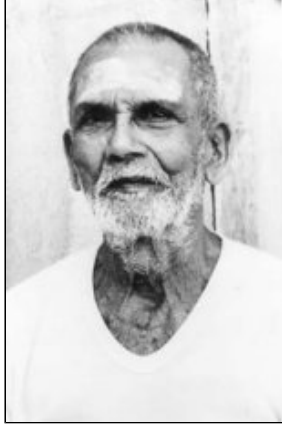
The subtitle that Lakshman Sarma gave this work 'The Supreme Science of the Self as Taught by Sri Ramana' is a slightly expanded version of the main title.

1. [Sri Ramana Paravidyopanishad 1-331](#) (Verses 1-331)
2. [Sri Ramana Paravidyopanishad 332-701](#) (Verses 332-701)



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Ramana Puranam



Sri Muruganar

‘Ramana Puranam’ is a long poem that was jointly composed by Ramana Maharshi and Muruganar in the 1930s. Muruganar wrote the first two hundred lines (approximately) and Sri Ramana later completed it by adding over three hundred more. It was eventually published in Tamil as the first poem in *Sri Ramana Sannidhi Murai*, a work by Muruganar that was modelled on Manikkavachagar’s *Tiruvachakam*.

The work has been translated and annotated by T. V. Venkatasubramanian, Robert Butler and myself. I hope that it will be published in book form later this year.



[Sri Ramana Puranam](#)

David Godman,
Arunachala,
January 2005

Sri Arunachala Pancharatnam

Preface

In the early 1980s some devotees of Sri Bhagavan asked Sri Sadhu Om to explain the import of *Sri Arunachala Pancharatnam* (The Five Gems to Sri Arunachala , one of the Five Hymns composed by Sri Bhagavan), and they recorded on a cassette tape the spontaneous explanations that he gave them in Tamil. Later, at the request of [Michael James](#), Sri Sadhu Om explained those recorded explanations in English. As he was doing so, Michael questioned him further, and noted down all that he explained. After completing a rough draft of his notes, Michael asked Sri Sadhu Om to check them, and this lead to further discussions and more detailed explanations. Finally, after Sri Sadhu Om had approved the rough draft with all his explanations added, Michael wrote a fair copy.

This fair copy remained as a handwritten manuscript for nearly twenty years, until Sri M. Sahadevan arranged to have it copied. It was then published, without the word-for-word meanings of the Sanskrit and Tamil verses, in five installments in *The Mountain Path* between the Advent 2003 and the Advent 2004 issues.

The present version, which contains the full commentary along with the word-for-word meanings of the Sanskrit and Tamil verses, was first published on this website in January 2005, and is now being republished with several corrections and alterations.



[Sri Arunachala Pancharatnam](#)

Who am I?

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[Page 1](#)

[Page 2](#)

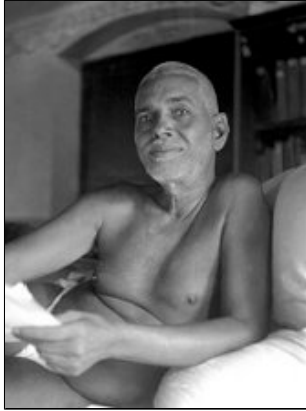
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In this page:

[Will there be realization of the Self even while the world is there, and taken to be real?](#)

[What is the means for constantly holding on to the thought 'Who am I?'](#)

* * * * *



Sri Ramana Maharshi

This essay, composed by Bhagavan in the mid-1920s, is the work that originated with answers written in the sand in 1901. For many years it was the standard introduction to Bhagavan's teachings. Its publication was subsidised and copies in many languages were always available in the ashram's bookstore, enabling new visitors to acquaint themselves with Bhagavan's practical advice.

Although it continues to be a standard primer for those who want to know what Bhagavan taught, parts of *Who Am I?* are quite technical. Since Sivaprakasam Pillai, the devotee who asked the questions in 1901, was well acquainted with philosophical terminology, Bhagavan freely used technical terms in many of his answers. I have explained many of these in notes that alternate with the text. The words of the original essay are printed in bold type. Everything else is my own commentary or explanation.

Since these explanations were originally answers to Sivaprakasam Pillai's questions, I have included some of the original questions in my own notes. Before each new section of *Who am I?* begins, I give, if possible, the question that prompted it. Towards the end of the essay Bhagavan took portions from different answers and amalgamated them into single paragraphs, making it hard to know for sure whether he is answering a particular question or merely giving a teaching statement.

The paragraph that begins the essay was not given out in response to a question. It was composed by Bhagavan when he was rewriting the work in the 1920s. Many philosophical works begin with a statement about the nature of happiness and the means by which it can be attained or discovered. Bhagavan has followed this tradition in this presentation

Every living being longs to be perpetually happy, without any misery. Since in everyone the highest love is alone felt for oneself, and since happiness alone is the cause of love, in order to attain that happiness, which is one's real nature and which is experienced daily in the mindless state of deep sleep, it is necessary to know oneself. To achieve that, enquiry in the form 'Who am I?' is the foremost means.

Question: Who am I?

'Who am I?' The physical body, composed of the seven

*dhatu*s, is not 'I'. The five sense organs and the five types of perception known through the senses are not 'I'. The five parts of the body which act and their functions are not 'I'. The five vital airs such as *prana*, which perform the five vital functions such as respiration, are not 'I'. Even the mind that thinks is not 'I'. In the state of deep sleep *vishaya vasanas* remain. Devoid of sensory knowledge and activity, even this [state] is not 'I'. After negating all of the above as 'not I, not I', the knowledge that alone remains is itself 'I'. The nature of knowledge is *sat-chit-ananda* [being-consciousness-bliss].

Vasanas is a key word in *Who am I?* It can be defined as, 'the impressions of anything remaining unconsciously in the mind; the present consciousness of past perceptions; knowledge derived from memory; latent tendencies formed by former actions, thoughts and speech.' It is usually rendered in English as 'latent tendencies'. *Vishaya vasanas* are those latent mental tendencies that impel one to indulge in knowledge or perceptions derived from the five senses. In a broader context it may also include indulging in any mental activity such as daydreaming or fantasizing, where the content of the thoughts is derived from past habits or desires.

The seven *dhatu*s are chyle, blood, flesh, fat, marrow, bone and semen. The five sense organs are the ears, skin, eyes, tongue and nose, and the five types of perception or knowledge, called *vishayas*, are sound, touch, sight, taste and smell. The five parts of the body that act are the mouth, the legs, the hands, the anus, and the genitals and their functions are speaking, walking, giving, excreting and enjoying. All the items on these lists are included in the original text. I have relegated them to this explanatory note to facilitate easy reading.

The five vital airs (*prana vayu*s) are not listed in the original text. They are responsible for maintaining the health of the body. They convert inhaled air and ingested food into the energy required for the healthy and harmonious functioning of the body.

This paragraph of *Who am I?* has an interesting history. Sivaprakasam Pillai's original question was 'Who am I?', the first three words of the paragraph. Bhagavan's reply, which can be found at the end of the paragraph, was 'Knowledge itself is "I". The nature of knowledge is *sat-chit-ananda*.' Everything else in this paragraph was interpolated later by Sivaprakasam Pillai prior to the first publication of the question-and-answer version of the text in 1923. The word that is translated as 'knowledge' is the Tamil equivalent of '*jnana*'. So, the answer to that original question 'Who am I?' is, '*Jnana* is "I" and the nature of *jnana* is *sat-chit-ananda*'.

When Bhagavan saw the printed text he exclaimed, 'I did not give this extra portion. How did it find a place here?'

He was told that Sivaprakasam Pillai had added the additional information, including all the long lists of physical organs and their functions, in order to help him understand the answer more clearly. When Bhagavan wrote the *Who Am I?* answers in an essay form, he retained these interpolations but had the printer mark the original answer in bold type so that devotees could distinguish between the two.

This interpolation does not give a correct rendering of Bhagavan's teachings on self-enquiry. In the following exchange (1) Bhagavan explains how self-enquiry should be done, and why the 'not I, not I' approach is an unproductive one:

Q: I begin to ask myself 'Who am I?', eliminate the body as not 'I', the breath as not 'I', and I am not able to proceed further.

B: Well, that is as far as the intellect can go. Your process is only intellectual. Indeed, all the scriptures mention the process only to guide the seeker to know the truth. The truth cannot be directly pointed at. Hence, this intellectual process.

You see, the one who eliminates the 'not I' cannot eliminate the 'I'. To say 'I am not this' or 'I am that' there must be an 'I'. This 'I' is only the ego or the 'I'-thought. After the rising up of this 'I'-thought, all other thoughts arise. The 'I'-thought is therefore the root thought. If the root is pulled out all others are at the same time uprooted. Therefore, seek the root 'I', question yourself 'Who am I?' Find the source and then all these other ideas will vanish and the pure Self will remain.

Question: Will there be realization of the Self even while the world is there, and taken to be real?

If the mind, which is the cause of all knowledge and all actions, subsides, the perception of the world will cease. [If one perceives a rope, imagining it to be a snake] perception of the rope, which is the substratum, will not occur unless the perception of the snake, which has been superimposed on it, goes. Similarly, the perception of one's real nature, the substratum, will not be obtained unless the perception of the world, which is a superimposition, ceases.

Question: What is the nature of the mind?

That which is called 'mind', which projects all thoughts, is an awesome power existing within the Self, one's real nature. If we discard all thoughts and look [to see what remains when there are no thoughts, it will be found that] there is no such entity as mind remaining separate [from those thoughts]. Therefore, thought itself is the nature of the mind. There is no such thing as 'the world' independent of thoughts. There are no thoughts in deep sleep, and there is no world. In waking and dream there are thoughts, and there is also the world. Just as a spider emits the thread of a web from within itself and withdraws it again into itself, in the same way the mind projects the world from within itself and later reabsorbs it into itself. When the mind emanates from the Self, the world appears. Consequently, when the world appears, the Self is not seen, and when the Self appears or shines, the world will not appear.

If one goes on examining the nature of the mind, it will finally be discovered that [what was taken to be] the mind is really only one's self. That which is called one's self is really *Atman*, one's real nature. The mind always depends for its existence on something tangible. It cannot subsist by itself. It is the mind that is called *sukshma sarira* [the subtle body] or *jiva* [the soul].

Question: What is the path of enquiry for understanding the nature of the mind?

That which arises in the physical body as 'I' is the mind. If one enquires, 'In what place in the body does this "I" first arise?' it will be known to be in the *hridayam*. That is the

birthplace of the mind. Even if one incessantly thinks 'I, I', it will lead to that place. Of all thoughts that arise in the mind, the thought 'I' is the first one. It is only after the rise of this [thought] that other thoughts arise. It is only after the first personal pronoun arises that the second and third personal pronouns appear. Without the first person, the second and third persons cannot exist.

Hridayam is usually translated as 'Heart', but it has no connection with the physical heart. Bhagavan used it as a synonym for the Self, pointing out on several occasions that it could be split up into two parts, *hrit* and *ayam*, which together mean, 'this is the centre'. Sometimes he would say that the 'I'-thought arises from the *hridayam* and eventually subsides there again. He would also sometimes indicate that the spiritual Heart was inside the body on the right side of the chest, but he would often qualify this by saying that this was only true from the standpoint of those who identified themselves with a body. For a *jnani*, one who has realised the Self, the *hridayam* or Heart is not located anywhere, or even everywhere, because it is beyond all spatial concepts. The following answer (2) summarises Bhagavan's views on this matter:

I ask you to see where the 'I' arises in your body, but it is not really quite true to say that the 'I' rises from and merges on the right side of the chest. The Heart is another name for the reality, and it is neither inside nor outside the body. There can be no in or out for it since it alone is — so long as one identifies with the body and thinks that he is in the body, he is advised to see where in the body the 'I'-thought rises and merges again.

A hint of this can also be found in this paragraph of *Who am I?* in the sentence in which Bhagavan asks devotees to enquire 'In what place in the body does this "I" first arise?'

Ordinarily, *idam*, which is translated here as 'place', means only that, but Bhagavan often gave it a broader meaning by using it to signify the state of the Self. Later in the essay, for example, he writes, 'The place [*idam*] where even the slightest trace of "I" does not exist is *swarupa* [one's real nature]'.

Sadhu Natanananda, on the flyleaf of his Tamil work *Sri Ramana Darshanam*, records a similar statement from Bhagavan: 'Those who resort to this place [*idam*] will obtain *Atma-jnana* automatically.' Clearly, he cannot be speaking of the physical environment of his ashram because paying a visit there didn't necessarily result in enlightenment.

So, when Bhagavan writes 'In what place —' he is not necessarily indicating that one should look for the 'I' in a particular location. He is instead saying that the 'I' rises from the dimensionless Self, and that one should seek its source there.

As he once told Kapali Sastri, (3) 'You should try to have rather than locate the experience'.

Question: How will the mind become quiescent?

The mind will only subside by means of the enquiry 'Who am I?' The thought 'Who am I?', destroying all other thoughts, will itself be finally destroyed like the stick used for stirring the funeral pyre.

Question: What is the means for constantly holding on to the thought 'Who am I?' And what is *jnana drishti*?

If other thoughts arise, one should, without attempting to

complete them, enquire, 'To whom did they occur?' What does it matter if ever so many thoughts arise? At the very moment that each thought rises, if one vigilantly enquires 'To whom did this appear?' it will be known 'To me'. If one then enquires 'Who am I?' the mind will turn back to its source and the thought that had arisen will also subside. By repeatedly practising in this way, the mind will increasingly acquire the power to abide at its source. When the mind, which is subtle, is externalised via the brain and the sense organs, names and forms, which are material, appear. When it abides in the Heart, names and forms disappear. Keeping the mind in the Heart, not allowing it to go out, is called 'facing the Self' or 'facing inwards'. Allowing it to go out from the Heart is termed 'facing outwards'. When the mind abides in the Heart in this way, the 'I', the root of all thoughts, [vanishes]. Having vanished, the ever-existing Self alone will shine. The state where not even the slightest trace of the thought 'I' remains is alone *swarupa* [one's real nature]. This alone is called *mauna* [silence]. Being still in this way can alone be called *jnana drishti* [seeing through true knowledge]. Making the mind subside into the Self is 'being still'. On the other hand, knowing the thoughts of others, knowing the three times [past present and future] and knowing events in distant places - these can never be *jnana drishti*.

The word *swarupa* is another key word in the text. It means 'one's real nature' or 'one's real form'. Each time the phrase 'one's real nature' appears in this text, it is a translation of *swarupa*. Bhagavan's repeated use of the word as a synonym for the Self indicates that the Self is not something that is reached or attained. Rather, it is what one really is, and what one always has been.

Mauna is another of the synonyms Bhagavan used to describe the Self:

Q: What is *mauna* [silence]?

A: That state which transcends speech and thought is *mauna*. That which is, is *mauna*. Sages say that the state in which the thought 'I' does not rise even in the least, alone is *swarupa*, which means *mauna*. That silent Self is alone God (4)

In *jnana*, the state of Self-knowledge or Self-realisation, there is no one who sees, nor are there objects that are seen. There is only seeing. The seeing that takes place in this state, called *jnana drishti*, is both true seeing and true knowing. It is therefore called 'seeing through true knowledge'.

In *Day by Day with Bhagavan* (17.10.46) Bhagavan points out that this seeing is really being and should not be confused with or limited to the sensory activity that goes under the same name: 'You are the Self. You exist always. Nothing more can be predicated of the Self than it exists. Seeing God or the Self is only being God or your Self. Seeing is being.' The same concept was elegantly formulated by Meister Eckart, the medieval German mystic, when he remarked, during one of his sermons, 'The eye by which I see God is the same eye by which God sees me. My eye and God's eye are one and the same, one in seeing, one in knowing'.

Question: What is the nature of the Self?

The Self, one's real nature, alone exists and is real. The world, the soul and God are superimpositions on it like [the illusory appearance of] silver in mother-of-pearl. These three

appear and disappear simultaneously. Self itself is the world; Self itself is the 'I'; Self itself is God; all is Siva, the Self.

At the beginning of this paragraph Bhagavan says, in effect, that the world, the soul and God are illusory appearances. Later he says that all three are the Self, and therefore real. This should be seen as a paradox rather than a contradiction. The following answer (5) clarifies Bhagavan's views:

Sankara was criticised for his views on *maya* [illusion] without understanding him. He said that (1) *Brahman* [the Self] is real (2) the universe is unreal, and (3) *Brahman* is the universe. He did not stop at the second because the third explains the other two. It signifies that the universe is real if perceived as the Self and unreal if perceived as apart from the Self. Hence *maya* and reality are one and the same.

The seeing of names and forms is a misperception because, in the Self, the one reality, none exist. Therefore, if a world of names and forms is seen, it must necessarily be an illusory one. Bhagavan explains this in verse 49 of *Guru Vachaka Kovai*:

Just as fire is obscured by smoke, the shining light of consciousness is obscured by the assemblage of names and forms. When, by compassionate divine grace, the mind becomes clear, the nature of the world will be known to be not illusory forms, but only the reality.

Question: Are there any other means for making the mind quiescent?

To make the mind subside, there is no adequate means except enquiry. If controlled by other means, the mind will remain in an apparent state of subsidence, but will rise again. For example, through *pranayama* [breath control] the mind will subside. However, the mind will remain controlled only as long as the *prana* [see the following note] is controlled. When the *prana* comes out, the mind will also come out and wander under the influence of *vasanas*. The source of the mind and the *prana* is one and the same. Thought itself is the nature of the mind, and the thought 'I' which indeed is the mind's primal thought, is itself the *ahankara* [the ego]. From where the ego originates, from there alone the breath also rises. Therefore, when the mind subsides, the *prana* will also subside, and when *prana* subsides, the mind will also subside. However, although the mind subsides in deep sleep, the *prana* does not subside. It is arranged in this way as a divine plan for the protection of the body and so that others do not take the body to be dead. When the mind subsides in the waking state and in *samadhi*, the *prana* also subsides. The *prana* is the gross form of the mind. Until the time of death, the mind retains the *prana* in the body. When the body dies, the mind forcibly carries away the *prana*. Therefore, *pranayama* is only an aid for controlling the mind; it will not bring about its destruction.

According to the *Upanishads*, *prana* is the principle of life and consciousness. It is the life breath of all the beings in the universe. They are born through it, live by it, and when they die, their individual *prana* dissolves into the cosmic *prana*. *Prana* is usually translated as 'breath' or 'vital breath', but this is only one of many of its manifestations in the human body. It is absorbed by both breathing and eating and by the *prana vayus* (mentioned earlier)

into energy that sustains the body. Since it is assimilated through breathing, it is widely held that one can control the *prana* in the body by controlling the breathing.

According to yoga philosophy, and other schools of thought agree, mind and *prana* are intimately connected. The collective name for all the mental faculties is *chitta*, which is divided into:

- (a) *manas* (the mind), which has the faculties of attention and choosing.
- (b) *buddhi* (the intellect), which reasons and determines distinctions.
- (c) *ahankara*, the individual feeling of 'I', sometimes merely translated as ego.

Chitta, according to yoga philosophy, is propelled by *prana* and *vasanas* and moves in the direction of whichever force is more powerful. Thus, the yogis maintain that by controlling the breath, which indirectly controls the flow of *pranas*, the *chitta* can be controlled. Bhagavan gives his own views on this later in the essay.

The reference to *samadhi* needs some explanation. According to Bhagavan,⁽⁶⁾ '*Samadhi* is the state in which the unbroken experience of existence is attained by the still mind.'

Elsewhere he has said, more simply, 'Holding onto reality is *samadhi*.' ⁽⁷⁾

Though Bhagavan would sometimes say that a person in *samadhi* is experiencing the Self, these *samadhis* do not constitute permanent realisation. They are temporary states in which the mind is either completely still or in abeyance.

Next: [Eventually, all that one has learnt will have to be forgotten.](#)

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(1) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 197.

(2) *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 23.5.46.

(3) *Sad Darshana Bhashya* pp. xvii-xix.

(4) *Be As You Are*, p. 13

(5) *Guru Ramana* 1974 ed., p. 65.

(6) *Guru Vachaka Kovai*, verse 898.

(7) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 391.

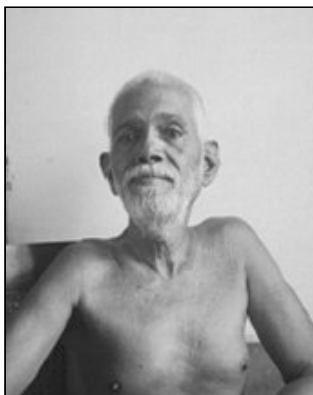
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In this page:

[Is it not possible for God or the Guru to effect the release of the soul?](#)

[Is there no difference between waking and dream?](#)

* * * * *



Sri Ramana Maharshi

The next section is a continuation of the answer to the previous question: 'Are there any other means for making the mind quiescent?'

Like breath control, meditation on a form of God, repetition of sacred words and regulation of diet are mere aids for controlling the mind. Through meditation on a form of God and through the repetition of sacred words the mind becomes focused on one point. An elephant's trunk is always moving around, but when a chain is given to it to hold in its trunk, that elephant will go on its way, holding onto the chain instead of trying to catch other things with it. Similarly, when the mind, which is always wandering, is trained to hold onto any name or form of God, it will only cling to that. Because the mind branches out into innumerable thoughts, each thought becomes very weak. As thoughts subside more and more, one-pointedness [of mind] is gained. A mind that has gained strength in this way will easily succeed in self-enquiry. Of all regulations taking sattvic food in moderate quantities is the best. Through [this], the sattvic quality of the mind gets enhanced and becomes an aid to self-enquiry.

A sattvic diet is one which is vegetarian and which also excludes stimulating substances - such as chillies, tobacco, alcohol - and food that is excessively sour, salty or pungent.

Some Indian systems of thought maintain that the mind is composed of three fluctuating components called gunas:

- (a) *sattva*, purity or harmony.
- (b) *rajas*, activity.
- (c) *tamas*, inertia or sluggishness.

Since the type of food eaten affects the quality of the mind, non-sattvic foods promote *rajas* and *tamas*. The sattvic mind is the most desirable. One of the aims of spiritual practice is to increase the sattvic component at the expense of *rajas* and *tamas*.

Question: Is it possible for the *vishaya vasanas*, which come from beginningless time, to be resolved, and for one to remain as the pure Self?

Although *vishaya vasanas*, which have been recurring down the ages, rise in countless numbers like the waves of an ocean,

they will all perish as meditation on one's real nature becomes more and more intense. Without giving room even to the doubting thought, 'Is it possible to destroy all these *vasanas* and remain as Self alone?' one should persistently and tightly hold onto meditation on one's real nature. However great a sinner one may be, one should, instead of lamenting, 'Oh, I am a sinner! How can I attain liberation?' completely give up even the thought of being a sinner. One steadfast in meditation on one's real nature will surely be saved.

Question: How long should enquiry be practised? What is non-attachment?

As long as there are *vishaya vasanas* in the mind, the enquiry 'Who am I?' is necessary. As and when thoughts arise, one should, then and there, annihilate them all through self-enquiry in the very place of their origin. Not giving attention to anything other than oneself is non-attachment or desirelessness; not leaving the Self is *jnana* [true knowledge]. In truth, these two [non-attachment and desirelessness] are one and the same. Just as a pearl diver, tying a stone to his waist, dives into the sea and takes the pearl lying on the bottom, so everyone, diving deeply within himself in a detached way can obtain the pearl of the Self. If one resorts uninterruptedly to remembrance of one's real nature until one attains the Self, that alone will be sufficient. As long as there are enemies within the fort, they will continue to come out. If one continues to cut all of them down as and when they emerge, the fort will fall into our hands.

Question: Is it not possible for God or the Guru to effect the release of the soul?

God and Guru are, in truth, not different. Just as the prey that has fallen into the jaws of the tiger cannot escape, so those who have come under the glance of the Guru's grace will never be forsaken. Nevertheless, one should follow without fail the path shown by the Guru.

Remaining firmly in Self-abidance, without giving the least scope for the rising of any thought other than the thought of the Self, is surrendering oneself to God. However much of a burden we throw on God, He bears it all. Since the one supreme ruling power is performing all activities, why should we, instead of yielding ourselves to it, think, 'I should not act in this way; I should act in that way'? When we know that the train is carrying all the freight, why should we, who travel in it, suffer by keeping our own small luggage on our heads instead of putting it down and remaining happily at ease?

In the last three sections Bhagavan has used three terms, *swarupa dhyanam* (meditation on one's real nature), *swarupa smaranai* (remembrance of one's real nature), and *atma chintanai* (the thought of the Self) to indicate the process by which one becomes aware of the Self. They should not be understood to mean that one should try to focus one's attention on the Self, for the real Self can never be an object of thought. The benedictory verse of *Ulladu Narpadu* explains what Bhagavan meant by such terms. It asks the question, 'How to meditate on that reality which is called the Heart?' since that reality alone exists, and it answers by saying, 'To abide in the Heart as it really is, is truly meditating.' That is to say, one can be the Heart by 'abiding as it is', but one cannot

experience it as an object of attention.

This interpretation is confirmed by the sentence in the last extract from *Who Am I?* in which Bhagavan equates *atma chintanai* (the thought of the Self) with *atma nishta* (Self-abidance).

In a similar vein Bhagavan remarks later in the essay that 'always keeping the mind fixed in the Self alone can be called self-enquiry'.

Question: What is happiness?

What is called happiness is merely the nature of the Self. Happiness and the Self are not different. The happiness of the Self alone exists; that alone is real. There is no happiness at all in even a single one of the [many] things in the world. We believe that we derive happiness from them on account of *aviveka* [a lack of discrimination, an inability to ascertain what is correct]. When the mind is externalised, it experiences misery. The truth is, whenever our thoughts [that is, our desires] get fulfilled, the mind turns back to its source and experiences Self-happiness alone. In this way the mind wanders without rest, emerging and abandoning the Self and [later] returning within. The shade under a tree is very pleasant. Away from it the sun's heat is scorching. A person who is wandering around outside reaches the shade and is cooled. After a while he goes out again, but unable to bear the scorching heat, returns to the tree. In this way he is engaged in going from the shade into the hot sunshine and in coming back from the hot sunshine into the shade. A person who acts like this is an *aviveki* [someone who lacks discrimination], for a discriminating person would never leave the shade. By analogy, the mind of a *jnani* never leaves *Brahman*, whereas the mind of someone who has not realised the Self is such that it suffers by wandering in the world before turning back to *Brahman* for a while to enjoy happiness. What is called 'the world' is only thoughts. When the world disappears, that is, when there are no thoughts, the mind experiences bliss; when the world appears, it experiences suffering.

Question: Is not everything the work of God?

In the mere presence of the sun, which rises without desire, intention or effort, the magnifying glass emits hot light, the lotus blossoms and people begin, perform and cease their work. In front of a magnet a needle moves. Likewise, through the mere influence of the presence of God, who has no *sankalpa* [intention to accomplish anything], souls, who are governed by the three or five divine functions, perform and cease their activities in accordance with their respective karmas. Even so, He [God] is not someone who has *sankalpa*, nor will a single act ever touch him. This [untouchability] can be compared to the actions of the world not touching the sun, or to the good and bad qualities of the elements [earth, water, fire and air] not affecting the immanent space.

Sankalpa means 'resolve', 'will', or 'intention'. God has no personal *sankalpa*. That is to say, He does not decide or even think about what he should do. Though mature devotees 'bloom' on account of his presence, it is not because He has decided to bestow His grace on these fortunate few. His presence is available to all, but only the mature convert it into realisation.

The three divine functions are creation, sustenance and

destruction. The five divine functions are these three plus veiling and grace. According to many Hindu scriptures, God creates, preserves and eventually destroys the world. While it exists, He hides His true nature from the people in it through the veiling power of *maya*, illusion, while simultaneously emanating grace so that mature devotees can lift the veils of illusion and become aware of Him as He really is.

Question: For those who long for release, is it useful to read books?

It is said in all the scriptures that to attain liberation one should make the mind subside. After realising that mind control is the ultimate injunction of the scriptures, it is pointless to read scriptures endlessly. In order to know the mind, it is necessary to know who one is. How [can one know who one is] by researching instead in the scriptures? One should know oneself through one's own eye of knowledge. For [a man called] Rama to know himself to be Rama, is a mirror necessary? One's self exists within the five sheaths, whereas the scriptures are outside them. This self is the one to be enquired into. Therefore, researching in the scriptures, ignoring even the five sheaths, is futile. Enquiring 'Who am I that am in bondage?' and knowing one's real nature is alone liberation.

In self-enquiry one is enquiring into the nature and origin of the individual self, not the all-pervasive *Atman*. When Self appears in capitals, it denotes *Atman*, the real Self. When self it appears in lower case, it refers to the individual.

The five sheaths or *kosas* envelop and contain the individual self. They are:

- (1) *annamayakosa*, the food sheath, which corresponds to the physical body.
- (2) *pranamayakosa*, the sheath made of *prana*.
- (3) *manomayakosa*, the sheath of the mind.
- (4) *vijnanamayakosa*, the sheath of the intellect.
- (5) *anandamayakosa*, the sheath of bliss.

Sheaths two, three and four comprise the subtle body (*sukshma sarira*) while the fifth sheath, called the causal body, corresponds to the state of the individual self during sleep.

The individual 'I' functions through the five sheaths. Practitioners of the *neti-neti* '(not this, not this)' type of *sadhana* reject their association with the five sheaths in the way described in the second paragraph of *Who Am I?* The idea behind this practice is that if one rejects all thoughts, feelings and sensations as 'not I', the real 'I' will eventually shine in a form that is unlimited by or to the sheaths.

Keeping the mind fixed in the Self at all times is called self-enquiry, whereas thinking oneself to be *Brahman*, which is *sat-chit-ananda* [being-consciousness-bliss], is meditation. Eventually, all that one has learnt will have to be forgotten.

One can distinguish different levels of experience in the practice of self-enquiry. In the beginning one attempts to eliminate all transient thoughts by concentrating on or looking for the primal 'I'-thought. This corresponds to the stage Bhagavan described earlier in the essay when one cuts down all the enemies, the thoughts, as they emerge from the fortress of the mind. If one achieves success in this for any length of time, the 'I'-thought, deprived of new thoughts to attach itself to, begins to subside, and one then moves

to a deeper level of experience. The 'I'-thought descends into the Heart and remains there temporarily until the residual *vasanas* cause it to rise again. It is this second stage that Bhagavan refers to when he says that 'keeping the mind fixed in the Self alone can be called self-enquiry'. Most practitioners of self-enquiry will readily admit that this rarely happens to them, but nevertheless, according to Bhagavan's teachings, fixing the mind in the Self should be regarded as an intermediate goal on the path to full realisation.

It is interesting to note that Bhagavan restricts the term 'self-enquiry' to this phase of the practice. This unusual definition was more or less repeated in an answer he gave to Kapali Sastri:

Q: If I go on rejecting thoughts, can I call it *vichara* [self-enquiry]?

A: It may be a stepping stone. But real *vichara* begins when you cling to yourself and are already off the mental movements, the thought waves. (8)

The following optimistic answers by Bhagavan, on keeping the mind in the Heart, may provide encouragement to those practitioners who often feel that such experiences may never come their way:

Q: How long can the mind stay or be kept in the Heart?

A: The period extends by practice.

Q: What will happen at the end of that period?

A: The mind returns to the present normal state. Unity in the Heart is replaced by a variety of perceived phenomena. This is called the outgoing mind. The Heart-going mind is called the resting mind.

When one daily practises more and more in this manner, the mind will become extremely pure due to the removal of its defects and the practice will become so easy that the purified mind will plunge into the Heart as soon as the enquiry is commenced. (9)

Bhagavan noted that 'thinking oneself to be *Brahman* is meditation', not enquiry. Traditional advaitic *sadhana* follows the path of negation and affirmation. In the negative approach, one continuously rejects all thoughts, feelings and sensations as 'not I'. On the affirmative route one attempts to cultivate the attitude 'I am *Brahman*' or 'I am the Self'. Bhagavan called this latter approach, and all other techniques in which one concentrates on an idea or a form, 'meditation', and regarded all such methods as being indirect and inferior to self-enquiry.

Q: Is not affirmation of God more effective than the quest 'Who am I?' Affirmation is positive, whereas the other is negation. Moreover, it indicates separateness.

A: So long as you seek to know how to realise, this advice is given to find your Self. Your seeking the method denotes your separateness.

Q: Is it not better to say 'I am the Supreme Being' than ask 'Who am I?'

A: Who affirms? There must be one to do it. Find that one. **Q:** Is not meditation better than investigation?

A: Meditation implies mental imagery, whereas investigation is for the reality. The former is objective, whereas the latter is subjective.

Q: There must be a scientific approach to this subject.

A: To eschew unreality and seek the reality is scientific.

(10)

Question: Is it necessary for one who longs for release to enquire into the nature of the *tattvas*?

Just as it is futile to examine the garbage that has to be collectively thrown away, so it is fruitless for one who is to know himself to count the numbers and scrutinise the properties of the *tattvas* that are veiling the Self, instead of collectively throwing them all away.

Indian philosophers have split the phenomenal world up into many different entities or categories which are called *tattvas*. Different schools of thought have different lists of *tattvas*, some being inordinately long and complicated. Bhagavan encouraged his devotees to disregard all such classifications on the grounds that, since the appearance of the world is itself an illusion, examining its component parts one by one is an exercise in futility.

Question: Is there no difference between waking and dream?

One should consider the universe to be like a dream. Except that waking is long and dreams are short, there is no difference [between the two states]. To the extent to which all the events which happen while one is awake appear to be real, to that same extent even the events that happen in dreams appear at that time to be real. In dreams, the mind assumes another body. In both the dream and the waking [states] thoughts and names-and-forms come into existence simultaneously.

The final two paragraphs of the essay are taken from an answer to a question that has already been given:

Question: Is it possible for the *vishaya vasanas*, which come from beginningless time, to be resolved, and for one to remain as the pure Self?

There are not two minds, one good and another evil. The mind is only one. It is only the *vasanas* that are either auspicious or inauspicious. When the mind is under the influence of auspicious tendencies, it is called a good mind, and when it is under the influence of inauspicious tendencies, a bad mind. However evil people may appear, one should not hate them. Likes and dislikes are both to be disliked. One should not allow the mind to dwell much on worldly matters. As far as possible, one should not interfere in the affairs of others. All that one gives to others, one gives only to oneself. If this truth is known, who indeed will not give to others? If the individual self rises, all will rise.

If the individual self subsides, all will subside. To the extent that we behave with humility, to that extent will good result. If one can continuously control the mind, one can live anywhere.

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(8) *Sad Darshana Bhashya*, 1975 ed., p. ix.

(9) *Be As You Are*, p. 66.

(10) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no 338.

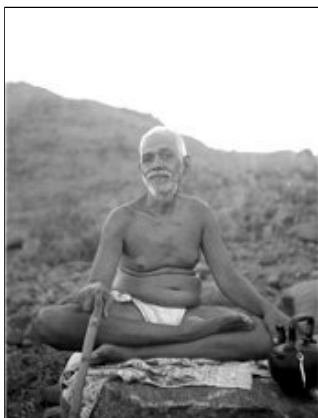
Bhagavan the *Atiasrami*

(First published in *The Mountain Path*, 1991, pp. 112-21.)

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Sri Ramana Maharshi

In the 1930s a devotee called Perumal Swami, who had managed Sri Ramanashram prior to 1922, instigated a court case against Ramana Maharshi and his brother Chinnaswami. The latter had taken over the management of the ashram around 1928. Perumal Swami claimed in his submission to the court that he was still the legitimate manager of [Sri Ramanasramam](#) and attempted to support his case with some rather convoluted logic. Firstly, he declared that since Bhagavan was a *sannyasin*, he could not legally own land or property. This being so, Perumal Swami argued, Bhagavan had no rights over the property known as Sri Ramanashram. Perumal Swami then went on to argue that since Bhagavan could not own any of the ashram's property, he had no authority to appoint his brother to manage it. He then advanced his own case by saying that since he had been the undisputed manager at Skandashram, where Bhagavan had lived from 1916-22, he must still be the ashram manager because neither Ramana Maharshi nor anyone else was legally competent to remove or replace him.

Perumal Swami's complaint to the court conveniently ignored two important points:

1. Bhagavan had never claimed that he was a *sannyasin*. Since he had never been formally initiated into any order of *sannyasins*, he was still entitled to own and dispose of property.
2. Perumal Swami had voluntarily relinquished the job of ashram manager in 1922. Since that date he had neither lived in the ashram nor taken any part in its management.

Under Indian law, the formal adoption of *sannyasa* means that the *sannyasin* can be legally regarded as being dead. He loses all rights to his property, which is taken over by his appointed heirs, and, if he belongs to some of the traditional orders of *sannyasa*, he has no rights to own or acquire property again. In order to refute Perumal Swami's case, Bhagavan had to demonstrate that he belonged to an *asrama* (that is, an accepted 'stage of life') that

permitted its members to own property. In *sannyasa*, the fourth *asrama*, owning property is prohibited, but members of the other three *asramas* (*brahmacharya*, *grihastha* and *vanaprastha*) face no such restriction. However, instead of taking the easy course and declaring himself to be either in the *grihastha* (householder) or *vanaprastha* (meditating hermit) *asrama*, he declared that he was in *atiasrama*, which means 'beyond all *asramas*'. This category is so little-known, even in India, during his first encounter with Perumal Swami's lawyer he was asked to define the state and certify that it was backed by some scriptural authority.

Question: To which *asrama* does Bhagavan belong?

Bhagavan: *Atiasrama*.

Q: What is it?

B: It is beyond the four commonly known *asramas*.

Q: Is it *sastraic*?

B: Yes, it is mentioned in the *sastras*.⁽¹⁾

This account in *Talks* was written down from memory by Munagala Venkataramiah, its compiler. A court stenographer also took down everything that Bhagavan said verbatim and the ashram's lawyer, T. P. Ramachandra Iyer, later made a copy of these answers for the ashram records. This copy, which has been preserved by the President of [Sri Ramanasramam](#), contains many interesting additional remarks that are not to be found in the *Talks* account. ⁽²⁾

Bhagavan began his testimony by talking about his early life and how he came to Tiruvannamalai. Since he had already seen Perumal Swami's complaint, Bhagavan knew that the court would want him to state which *asrama* he belonged to. He therefore began his remarks in the following way:

I am of *brahmin* birth. When I came to this place I was seventeen years old. My *upanayana* [the brahmin thread ceremony] had taken place even before I came here. When I came to this place I had been living among people who were in the *grihastha asrama*. Within an hour of coming to this town I threw away my sacred thread and then had my head shaved. I arrived here with approximately three rupees. I threw away that money also.

In throwing away his thread he renounced his caste and in shaving his head he indicated that he had embarked on a life of physical renunciation without taking the formal step of adopting *sannyasa*.

After giving a few more details about his early life, he gave three answers that were partially recorded in the dialogue given above:

1. I remain in *atiasrama*, that is, not attached to anything in life.
2. *Atiasrama* is in the *sastras*.
3. I do not know of anyone else who is remaining in this *asrama*.

These answers were given on 15th November, 1936. A few weeks later, on 5th December, Perumal Swami's lawyer continued his cross-examination. This is the version recorded in Talks:

Question: You spoke of *atiasrama* the other day. Is there authority for it? Is it mentioned anywhere?

Bhagavan: Yes, in the *Upanishads*, the *Suta Samhita* [*Skanda Purana*], *Bhagavata*, *Bharata* and other works.

Q: Are there any restrictions or disciplines for that state?

B: There are characteristics of it mentioned.

Q: There are Gurus for each *asrama*. Is there a Guru for *atiasrama*?

B: Yes.

Q: But you do not admit a Guru.

B: There is a Guru for everyone. I admit a Guru for me also.

Q: Who is your Guru?

B: The Self.

Q: For whom?

B: For myself. The Guru may be internal or external. He may reveal himself internally or externally.

Q: Can the *atiasrami* own property?

B: There is no restriction for them. They may do what they please. Suka is said to have married and begotten children also.

Q: The *atiasrami* is like a householder in that case.

B: I have already said that he is above the four recognised *asramas*.

Q: If they can marry, own property etc., they are only *grihasthas*.

B: That may be your view.

Q: Can they own property and convey the same to others?

B: They may or may not. It depends on their *prarabdha* [destiny].

Q: Is there any karma for them?

B: Their conduct is not regulated according to rules or codes.(3)

The official court transcript that covers this part of the cross-examination contains a number of significant details that are not recorded in *Talks*. Only Bhagavan's answers appear in T. P. R.'s copy of the court document, but when these answers are correlated with the answers in *Talks*, the aim and scope of the questions can easily be inferred. The answers were:

1. Details about *atiasrama* are contained in the *Suta Samhita*.
2. The injunctions about *atiasrama* are set out in this work.
3. If those who are in *atiasrama* need property, they are entitled to possess it.
4. For any *asrama* a Guru is needed.
5. A Guru is necessary even for those who are in *atiasrama*.
6. For me *Atma* itself is the Guru. My *Atma* is Guru for my *Atma*.
7. I have read in the *Puranas* that those who followed *atiasrama* owned property.
8. These things are described in *Suta Samhita*, that is to say, in the *Skanda Purana*.
9. In *atiasrama* one can declare, 'This is my property'.
10. It has been declared that those who are in the state of *atiasrama* can dispose of their property to other people.
11. Whether *grihastha* and *atiasrama* are the same depends on

the view of the man who is looking.

12. For those who remain in *atiasrama*, there is no need to perform *nitya* karmas [daily rituals].

The court transcript reveals more clearly than the *Talks* account that the case was a property dispute and that its resolution hinged on whether or not Bhagavan could own and dispose of property. Bhagavan's claim that he could own property because he was an *atiasrami* was an unusual one, but he supported his claim by citing the *Suta Samhita*.⁽⁴⁾ The *Suta Samhita*, which is part of the *Skanda Purana*, is little read nowadays, but in ancient times it had enormous authority and influence. In an introduction to an edition of this work that Bhagavan kept for reference, the editor notes that there is a tradition that Adi-Sankaracharya read the *Suta Samhita* eighteen times before he began work on his famous commentaries.

There are four verses in the *Siva Mahatmya Khanda*, one of the sub-divisions of the *Suta Samhita*, which back up Bhagavan's claim that one who has realised the Self has transcended all castes and *asramas* and is therefore not subject to any restriction such as *asrama dharmas*, the rules that members of each *asrama* have to abide by.

1. A person who has attained true knowledge [*aparoksha vijnana*] with the help of the *vedantic vakyas* [the four *mahavakyas* or great sayings of the *Upanishads*], and who experiences the *Atma* which is full of bliss, is not subject to any restrictions.
2. For the people who belong to castes, elaborate *asrama dharmas* [codes of behaviour for each of the stages of life] have been laid down by eminent persons well versed in the *sastras*. These rules are always compulsory for those people who have a caste and an *asrama*.
3. The caste and *asrama dharmas* do not bind those, either male or female, who have attained clear knowledge of *Brahman*.
4. If a person abandons his caste and *asrama* without realising the inherent knowledge of the *Atma*, his fall is certain

Although Bhagavan regularly cited the *Suta Samhita* when he was asked to produce some scriptural authority for the state of *atiasrama*, it cannot be said that he endorsed the second and fourth of these verses from the *Siva Mahatmya Khanda* in which it is stated that those who have not realised the Self should adhere at all times to their caste and *asrama* rules. During the *Veda parayana*, for example, which was conducted in his presence every day, Bhagavan allowed all visitors and devotees to attend, saying that it was conducive to meditation. This was a flagrant violation of caste rules since traditionally only the higher castes are supposed to listen to such chants. Bhagavan encouraged devotees to break this rule and refused to pay any attention to the complaints of the traditionalists who pointed out that he was deliberately flouting caste and *asrama* (*varnasrama*) rules. On one occasion, when a North Indian visitor challenged Bhagavan on this matter, Bhagavan curtly told him to sit down and mind his own business.⁽⁵⁾

In the dining room Bhagavan did not object if brahmins decided to eat with the non-brahmins (a very basic violation of *varnasrama*

dharma) so long as it was their custom to do so in other places as well. But if they observed caste eating rules at home, Bhagavan would often insist that they continue to observe such rules in the ashram.(6) Bhagavan did not want the ashram to be used as a platform for visitors who wanted to make political or sociological gestures. His often-repeated phrase, 'Attend to what you came here for,' was frequently directed at visitors who forgot to leave their politics and their opinions at home.

Bhagavan's seat in the dining room, neither in the brahmin nor the non-brahmin sections, was an outer symbolic indication that his realisation had placed him beyond the restrictions of caste and *asrama* rules. In an amusing and instructive incident narrated by Krishna Bhikshu, Bhagavan once stated in the dining room that he was in effect an *atiasrama* because he no longer had the feeling that he was either a brahmin or a non-brahmin.

During the lifetime of Sri Bhagavan there was a screen across the dining hall separating the brahmins from the others. Bhagavan himself sat against the wall at right angles to both and in view of both. This is important to remember for the incident that follows. This screen implied an interdict on inter-dining between brahmins and non-brahmins. One day a relative of Bhagavan [and therefore a brahmin] demanded to eat among the non-brahmins but the *Sarvadhikari* [the ashram manager] would not allow it. They were disputing about it when Bhagavan came on the scene and asked what was the matter.

'He says that he has no caste,' the *Sarvadhikari* told him. 'That all are equal in the presence of Bhagavan and that he is simply a human being and not bound by the shackles of caste, creed, clime or colour.'

'Oh, is that so?' Bhagavan said, looking surprised. 'Then in that case you are wrong to insist that he should eat with the brahmins.'

But then, turning to his cousin, Bhagavan remarked, 'But you too are wrong. These people here feel that they are non-brahmins. You have no caste feeling. So how can you sit among them? There is only one person here who has the feeling of being neither brahmin nor non-brahmin, and that is myself. So,' calling the attendant, 'place a leaf plate for him by my side; let him sit with me.' The young man was shocked by the implication of this proposal and immediately took his place at the brahmin side.(7)

The disagreements about Bhagavan's real views on caste and *asrama* regulations have probably arisen because Bhagavan himself refused to endorse any of the conflicting views on the subject. In *Day by Day*, for example, we have the following exchange:

Another visitor asked Bhagavan if it was not necessary that the *varnasrama* [caste and *asrama*] difference should go if the nations was to progress.

Bhagavan: 'How can one say whether it is necessary or not necessary? I never say anything on such subjects.'

People often come and ask me for my opinion of *varnasrama*. If I say anything they will go at once and publish in the papers, "So and so is also of such and such an opinion".' (8)

Although Bhagavan declined to air his views on the subject (assuming of course that he had any!) it is clear from his actions that he often turned a blind eye when devotees violated caste rules, and occasionally he even encouraged them to do so. In an early issue of *The Mountain Path* there is a comment by T. K. Sundaresa Iyer that places these attitudes in their proper perspective:

Bhagavan was above formal orthodoxy or unorthodoxy. Whatever he did was orthodox because he did it, since he was higher than Manu and was himself the source of orthodoxy. People who failed to see that were putting the letter above the spirit. (9)

One can extend this line of logic a little further by saying that if devotees took part in an activity, such as listening to the chanting of the *Vedas*, which was sanctioned by Bhagavan, then, since Bhagavan is the source of orthodoxy, such activities become orthodox, rather than a violation of the rules.

Next: [Many people tend to think that *jnanis* are omnipotent](#)

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(1) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 281.

(2) Some of the answers from the court's record were incorporated in an article by Dr T. N. Krishnaswami that was published in *The Mountain Path*, 1967, pp. 150-151.

(3) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 281.

(4) In the *Talks* account Munagala Venkataramiah recorded that Bhagavan also cited the *Upanishads*, *Bhagavata*, *Bharata* and 'other works' to support his views on *atiasrama*. As none of these works is mentioned in the court transcript, I will not discuss or cite them here. Some of these other verses appeared in an article in *The Mountain Path*, 1984, (pp. 161-2) by Swami Atmananda Giri, which also dealt with Bhagavan's status as an *atiasrami*.

(5) *The Mountain Path*, 1968, p. 72.

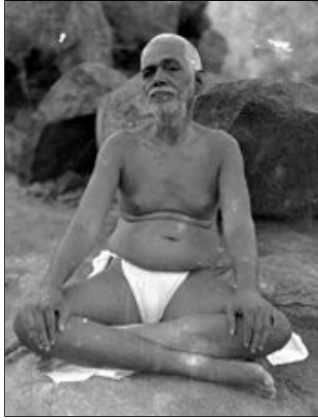
(6) Bhagavan's attitude to caste rules in the dining room was discussed in the columns of *The Mountain Path* in the 1960s (see 1967 p. 259 and pp. 348-9; 1968, p. 88) by Arthur Osborne, Prof. K. Swaminathan and Devaraja Mudaliar. Prof. Swaminathan strongly disagreed with Arthur Osborne's view that Bhagavan expected visitors to the ashram to adhere to whatever social or religious rules they observed at home.

(7) *The Mountain Path*, 1965, p. 217

(8) *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 2.1.1946.

(9) *The Mountain Path*, 1965, p. 136. The same idea is expressed in v. 96 of a Tamil work entitled *Swarupa Saram*: 'The *jnani* has become one, tranquil and pure. To him ether and the rest [of the five elements] are the form of the Self. Whatever actions such a one has given up become prohibited actions. Whatever

he undertakes becomes proper action.'



Sri Ramana Maharshi

Being free from the necessity to adhere to *varnasrama* rules is only one aspect of *atiasrama*. For Bhagavan, the term denoted a transcendental experience of the Self, not just a licence to ignore rules and regulations. This dimension of *atiasrama* is well brought out in another sequence of verses from the *Suta Samhita*:

14 & 15

One who realises the *paratattvam* [the supreme reality] which is different from the body and the senses, which is omniscient, self-luminous, and full of bliss and happiness - that person is *atiasrama*.

16

One who knows the *mahadeva* [God or the great effulgence], who is free from the three states [of waking, dreaming and sleeping] and merely witnesses them - that person is *ativarnasrama* [beyond castes and *asramas*].

17

The essential truth about the identity of the Self and Iswara is only attainable by those who have heard the vedantic *vakyas* from a competent guru.

18 & 19.1

The regulations concerning *varnasrama*, which have been created by *maya*, pertain only to the body. These things [the rules about *varnasrama*] are not applicable to the *Atma*, awareness of which is an awakening from ignorance. One who realises this [*Atma*] is deemed to be *ativarnasrama*.

19.2 & 20

'Just as the world is functioning of its own accord in the presence of the sun, before me the world is also functioning.' One who thinks in this way is supposed to have transcended the *varnasramas*. This knowledge can only be attained by realising the import of the *mahavakyas*.

21

'Just as the various ornaments made out of gold are created by *maya*, so this world, created by the mind in myself, is also created by *maya*.' One who has realised this with the help of the *mahavakyas* is *ativarnasrama*.

22 & 23

Just as the appearance of silver on an oyster shell is an illusion created by the mind, so the entire world is the creation of *maya*. One who realises this through the *mahavakyas*, is *ativarnasrama*.

24 & 25

'O Purushottama [Vishnu]! There are different grades of bodies: low caste, high caste, plants, trees and *devas*. Pervading all these bodies like *akasa* [space or ether] and not affected by all these things, is the Supreme, without beginning or end, without form, effulgent. I am that Supreme.' One who understands this through realising the *mahavakyas* is *ativarnasrama*.

26 & 27

A person's confusion in an unknown place is dispelled by a guide. Later, when he recollects his previous state, he remembers his old confusion [without being troubled by it]. Similarly, the reality of the world, though destroyed by true knowledge, still appears to me. But really that [world-appearance] no longer exists. One who realises this through the *mahavakyas* is *ativarnasrama*.

29

By realising his own Self, the instructions imposed by *varnasrama dharma*s drop away of their own accord. Such a person transcends the barriers of *asramas* and castes and remains in his own Self.

30

In this way a person who has transcended all *asramas* and *varnas*, and who remains in his pure Self, is declared to be *ativarnasrama* by all the vedantic experts. (10)

Bhagavan kept a small booklet entitled *Suta Samhita Saram*

(*The Essence of Suta Samhita*) on a bookshelf by his sofa. It contained a Tamil translation of all the verses from the *Siva Mahatmya Khanda* and the *Mukti Khanda* that I have given in this article. Since he often cited it or produced it when the subject of *atiasrama* came up, it is reasonable to infer that, except for the verses that insist on a strict observance of all *varnasrama* rules, he endorsed its contents. The same booklet, incidentally, also contains a sequence of verses whose aim is to demonstrate that women may become *sannyasis*. Some schools of thought in India teach that women are not eligible to enter this state. If Bhagavan was ever approached for an opinion on this matter, he would often produce the same small booklet in order to demonstrate that there was scriptural authority to support the claims of women who wanted to take *sannyasa*.

These two sets of verses that Bhagavan cited to support his views on *atiasrama* indicate that there are two aspects to this state: the first, and the most fundamental one, is that by realising the Self the *atiasrami* has transcended all names, forms and categories; and the second aspect, which follows naturally from the first, is that because the *atiasrami* has ceased to be a person inhabiting a body and identifying with it, he is no longer subject to any of the rules which apply to those who still imagine that they are individual human beings. From a theistic point of view one can say that the *atiasrami's* actions are God's and cannot therefore be encompassed or judged by any human code of conduct. Bhagavan upheld this view when he once remarked, ' a man [who holds the Self in remembrance] is not concerned with the right or wrong of actions. His actions are God's and therefore right.' (11)

It has become somewhat fashionable among certain modern gurus to say, in effect, 'I have realised the Self; therefore I can do what I like because society's rules no longer apply to me'. The true *atiasrami* would never make a statement like this because he or she would know that there is no 'I' left that can select particular desires and then indulge them. The true *jnani* or *atiasrami* according to Bhagavan, has no *sankalpa*, that is to say he has no will or desire of his own. His actions are spontaneous manifestations of the Self.

Sadhu Natanananda, in his Tamil book [*Sri Ramana Darsanam*](#), has recorded an interesting incident that demonstrates the point that Bhagavan, as an *atiasrami*, had no will or desire of his own:

During his last days, when Sri Bhagavan's body was affected by cancer, he remained indifferent to the treatments arranged by his devotees. He handed over the care of his body to the doctors since that was the wish of the devotees. At that time he said, 'Our job is only remain as a witness to all that happens; it is not to imagine this way or that way regarding anything'. Following this dictum he remained to the very end as a mere witness, free from anxieties. When devotees found that there was no apparent improvement in his condition, even after prolonged treatment, they became agitated. They wanted to know whether Sri Bhagavan would permit them to try a drastic method of treatment that had been prescribed by the doctors as a last resort. Sri Bhagavan replied, 'Why should you ask me all this? Was it I who asked for treatment? Was it not you alone who took the initiative in this? Ideas regarding what should happen and what

should not happen occur only to you. I have no connection with this.' And then he kept quiet. (12)

There was no thought in Bhagavan to prolong the life in his body, and since no desire arose in him to alleviate the excruciating pains of terminal cancer, he was quite content merely to witness them.

Many people tend to think that *jnanis* are omnipotent, that they can accomplish anything they wish. Bhagavan never felt this way. In another telling exchange, which was also recorded by Sadhu Natanananda at the end of Bhagavan's life, he informed one grieving devotee that he had no ability to change the destiny of the body that the devotee identified as Bhagavan:

Towards the end of Bhagavan's life a devotee, who firmly believed in the omnipotence of the great ones, could not bear to see the Maharshi's body become weak because of the disease that was afflicting it. The devotee appealed to the Maharshi with great feeling that he should transfer the disease to him and stay in the body for some more time in order to save many other helpless devotees. Wondering at the devotee's child-like innocence, Sri Bhagavan looked at him with compassion and replied graciously, 'Who created this disease? Is it not enough that I have borne till today all by myself this load of flesh which [once it is dead] must be carried by four persons? Should I continue bearing it henceforth?' Through these kind words he made clear that the law of destiny was inexorable.(13)

The *atiasrami's* inability to execute or even have personal desires was brought home to me some years ago in a conversation I had with U. G. Krishnamurti, an iconoclastic spiritual teacher who likes to poke fun at traditional ideas on spirituality. While talking about the state of realisation he remarked, 'All religious teachers say that the seeker is in bondage whereas the so-called enlightened one is free. Actually, the opposite is equally true. One who imagines himself to be a person also imagines that he has free-will. That person makes choices, and if he chooses not to be put off by legal or social restrictions, he can do whatever he likes. But when the idea of the person disappears, free-will, which is just another idea, goes along with it. One is then utterly bound by circumstances because there is no one left to make choices or act on desires. In that state the actions of the body and the brain are just automatic responses to external stimuli.(14) Since no inherent faculty remains to modify these responses, the bondage is complete and irreversible.'

These remarks were made partly in jest, but there is also a certain element of truth in them. To solve the apparent contradiction - that the *jnani* or the *atiasrami* is simultaneously liberated and bound - one must define more accurately what 'freedom' or 'liberation' is. There are two kinds of freedom: 'freedom to' and 'freedom from'. 'Freedom to' implies the existence of choice and of one who chooses. It is basically self-indulgence, for the individual self selects certain desires and then attempts to fulfil them. This 'freedom to' is finite since there is a limit to how much the body may indulge: one cannot, for example, eat a million meals a day.

'Freedom from' may also be finite - one may be free from

attachment to money, for example, but not free from the desire for fame. But for the *jnani* 'freedom from' is absolute because he has permanently given up the idea that he is an individual person. Though he has no 'freedom to', since that would imply the existence of an individual self, he is free from all desires, fears, etc., and is content to let his body experience whatever destiny has in store for it. Not having an ability to choose and judge may seem like bondage to an *ajnani*, but for the *jnani* it is a consequence of the ultimate freedom.

From occasional remarks that Bhagavan made, one can get the impression that he had very little 'freedom to' especially in the later years at Sri Ramanashram. Two stories told by N. N. Rajan will illustrate the point I am trying to make. In 1943, after one of his attendants, Sivanandam, had tried unsuccessfully to compel Bhagavan to take a drink of water, Bhagavan remarked, with some irritation, 'Look, people call me "Swami, Swami," and are under the impression that sagehood is a bed of roses. See the trouble encountered by Swami now. Whoever asks me to do anything I have to obey and satisfy him; whatever visitors say, according to their likes and dislikes, I have to patiently follow. Look at the way a sage is under the control of the people around him!'⁽¹⁵⁾

In another story recorded in 1948 Bhagavan remarked to the same attendant who was about to go off duty. 'You all at least have some change, but I am fixed up here throughout the day without any freedom. I am unable to move about freely like you. This is the fate of even maharajas and other famous people. They have to take medical advice for choosing items of food even while they are normal and healthy. This is the case with me also. I like food made with wheat, but the people here will not allow me to take it. Anyone who wants to eat delicious food may eat whatever they want, but why should they compel me to take only some specified items of food? See how it is.'⁽¹⁶⁾

One more story on the same theme. It was well known that Bhagavan didn't like to sit on his sofa all day. He called it his 'jail' and only sat there out of consideration for the devotees who were continuously coming for *darshan*. Up till the early 1930s Bhagavan was able to spend a lot of his time away from the hall, doing odd jobs in the ashram. If any devotees came for *darshan*, Madhava Swami, the attendant who looked after the old hall, would come and notify him and Bhagavan would then go back to his sofa. Annamalai Swami told me that he was once working with Bhagavan when they both saw Madhava Swami walking towards them. Bhagavan sighed and said, 'Here comes a new warrant for my arrest. I have to go back to jail!'

Clearly then, Bhagavan had very little 'freedom to' in his daily life. However, his 'freedom from' was absolute, enabling him to witness dispassionately all the inconveniences that ashram life imposed upon him. One should also remember that only those who identify him with a body could imagine that his freedom was in any way curtailed. If one can have instead the attitude that he was and is the unmanifest Self, it is easy to see that at all times he was utterly free.

(10) From the *Skanda Purana*, *Suta Samhita*, *Mukti Khanda*, ch. 5.

(11) *Conscious Immortality*, 1984, p. 130.

(12) *Sri Ramana Darsanam*, 1973, p. 91

(13) *Sri Ramana Darsanam*, 1973, p. 112.

(14) I think that Bhagavan would say that although this sometimes happens, many of the *jnani's* actions are spontaneous, being a result of promptings from the Self, rather than external stimuli.

(15) *The Mountain Path*, 1981, p. 66. See also a correction to this quote that was printed on p. 176 of the same year.

(16) *The Mountain Path*, 1981, p. 93.

Bhagavan's Deposition on Arunachala

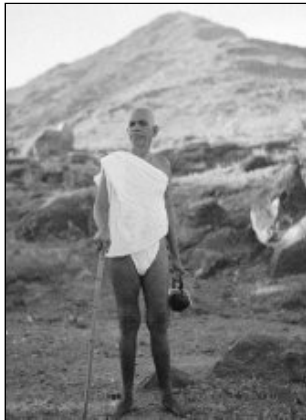
(First published in *The Mountain Path*, 1990, pp. 14-20)

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Sri Ramana Maharshi



Arunachala

Until the 1930s the eastern slope of the mountain of Arunachala was administered by the Arunachaleswara Temple in Tiruvannamalai. Prior to 1934, its right to do so had been accepted by everyone on and around the hill. From time immemorial the temple authorities had maintained the tanks and temples on the mountain, put out any fires that broke out, and arranged for all the forest produce to be sold in an orderly manner. The unquestioned authority that the temple authorities had wielded over this area had arisen because of the local tradition that the hill was Siva Himself manifesting in the form of a *lingam*. Since the belief was widespread and largely unchallenged, the local people felt that it was natural and correct that the main temple in Tiruvannamalai should administer all affairs pertaining to the hill.

This traditional arrangement was challenged by the Government of India in 1934. In May that year the Government issued a notification in the district gazette which stated that the whole of Arunachala was a reserve forest and was thus the property of the Government of India. The temple authorities challenged the Government's order in court, maintaining that the Temple was the legitimate owner of 1,750 acres on the eastern side of the hill. This area included all the tanks and temples on the slope of the mountain that begins at the back of the Arunachaleswara Temple.

One of the Temple trustees approached Bhagavan and requested him to give evidence to the court that would support the Arunachaleswara Temple's claim to the land. Bhagavan agreed and in 1938 lawyers for the plaintiff and the defendant came to the ashram to hear his evidence and to cross-examine him on it. Bhagavan's initial evidence took the form of a written deposition. A small part of this deposition was recorded in *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 492. The full text is given below.

* * *

I came to Tiruvannamalai in the year 1896 and lived on the hill from 1899 to 1922. In that year this ashram was started, and since then I have been living here [at Sri

Ramanashram]. From the time I first lived on the hill, all the hill areas have been in the possession of the Devasthanam [the Arunachaleswara Temple authorities]. The ashram on the hill where I used to live was started in 1902. The building which is there now was completed in the year 1916. This particular ashram was built with the permission and kindness of the Devasthanam. [The permission was oral, for no written Government order or permission was ever received]. From the year 1899 until a date a few years after I left Skandashram, the front side [the eastern slope] of the hill was never in the possession of the Government.

Having given his views on the ownership of the hill, Bhagavan then cited a few examples of how well the Temple authorities had administered the hill during the period when he had been living on it.

[Many years ago] a man called Saraswathy Swami lived on the hill. That Swami advertised that he intended to perform a ceremonial worship of an image of Lord Subramania [on the hill]. The Devasthanam objected and stopped it. In an official notice they said that the hill itself is *linga swarupa* [God in the form of a *lingam*] and that to perform worship of another deity on it, and to celebrate a festival there, was against the tradition of the *sastras*. On another occasion, when my mother attained [*samadhi*], they raised a precautionary objection that her *samadhi* should not be on the hill. They feared that we might build her *samadhi* on the hill itself. On this occasion also their objection was that the hill was *Iswara swarupa* [God's own physical form].

In those days the Devasthanam authorities gave out orders that the wood cutters should not cut the trees on the hill. Every year during the time I was on the hill the Devasthanam gave licences to various people to cut the grass and to collect the other forest products. Whenever there was a fire on the hill, it was put out at the expense of the Devasthanam. On one occasion when we happened to cut some of the cacti that were causing an inconvenience to the ashram, and then burned them, the Devasthanam objected, saying that we should not have a fire in that place. All these incidents took place on the eastern slope. This eastern slope has fixed boundaries.

Bhagavan then went on to describe why the hill was sacred and why, in his opinion, the temple authorities should be allowed to administer it.

There is an *aitikya* [tradition] that this hill is *linga swarupa*, that is to say, that this hill itself is God. This *aitikya* is not to be found anywhere else. That is the cause of the glory of this place. The tradition of this place is that this hill is the form of God and that in its real nature it is full of light. Every year the Deepam festival celebrates the real nature of the mountain as light itself. Authority for this is found in the *Vedas*, the *Puranas* and in the *stotras* [poems] of devotees. Because this tradition maintains that this hill is *Siva swarupa*, the practice of *giri pradakshina*, walking clockwise around the

mountain as an act of reverence or worship, has arisen. I also have faith in *giri pradakshina* and have had experience of it.

There is no *sastra* to separate the hill from the temple. The inseparability of the hill and the temple can be observed during Kartikai Deepam when the festival [of kindling the light] is conducted simultaneously in the temple and on the summit of the hill. Further proof of the tradition that the hill is the form of God can be found in the bi-annual festivals in which the image of Arunachaleswara in the temple performs *pradakshina* of the hill.

In the account in *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* Bhagavan is reported to have also said: 'Siva always remains in three forms: 1) as *parabrahman*; 2) as *linga* (here as the hill); and 3) as *siddha*.' The third category refers to Siva in the form of Arunagiri Yogi whom Bhagavan said resides on the north slope of the hill. Although this quotation summarises views that Bhagavan had expressed on other occasions, there is no record of this remark in the court transcript.

Bhagavan continued:

In accordance with the tradition that the hill is *Iswara swarupa*, the Devasthanam performs *abhishekam* to the top of the hill in the same way that it would do to a *lingam*. For the last ten to twelve years the cauldron that contains the Deepam light on the top of the hill is carried to the summit every year during the festival. Prior to this, for many, many years, the cauldron was left there throughout the year.

I am a devotee of Arunachaleswara. I have composed a poem in Tamil which says that the Arunachala hill is *Iswara swarupa*.

The Government's lawyer objected to Bhagavan introducing this poem as evidence, but the objection was overruled. It seems that no one recorded the original Tamil verse. It now only exists in the following English translation:

Lord Arunachala appeared out of the hill and at the request of Brahma and Vishnu merged back in the hill. Simultaneously he manifested as the *lingam* at the bottom of the hill. The hill continues to represent the Lord.

A similar idea, which may be derived from this verse, can be found in the account in *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*: 'Siva originally appeared as a column of light. On being prayed to, the light disappeared into the hill and manifested as [a] *lingam*. Both are Siva.' After Bhagavan had submitted his verse, the case was adjourned for five days. On its resumption, Bhagavan added a few extra comments on the traditions and mythology of the hill.

Even after this [the time when Siva appeared to Brahma and Vishnu in the form of Light] Ishan [Iswara] appeared to Devi in the form of Light before disappearing graciously into the form of the hill.

There are many ancient *tirthams* [sacred tanks] that exist on the hill. Among them the Mulaipal Tirtham and the Pada Tirtham, are important. There is a tradition that these *tirthams* were created by Siva and Parvati for the

sake of Guhai Namasivaya.

The Government's lawyer then began his cross-examination of Bhagavan, questioning him in detail on some of the statements he had made. Only Bhagavan's answers are recorded in the court transcript. I have separated the text into paragraphs in such a way that I hope each paragraph constitutes a different answer. I leave the reader to infer what the questions might have been.

I lived in Virupaksha Cave for sixteen years. I lived in Skandashram for six years. I have stayed at this place [Sri Ramanashram] since 1922.

I constructed a building at Virupaksha Cave. No written permission was obtained from anyone for the construction of the building.

Skandashram was started in 1902. The building was completed in the year 1916. Even after that date some construction work was carried on.

At first it [Skandashram] began as a *tirtham*. Later it developed into a place of residence. Before Skandashram came into existence, moisture was found in another location nearby. Its source was in a rock that was twenty yards away. This *tirtham* is now located between Skandashram and Virupaksha Cave. It was only later that the Skandashram *tirtham* came into being.

Because it [Skandashram] was built by a person called Kandan who lived in the ashram, by his own hands, it became known as Skandashram. That *tirtham* [I just spoke about] is attached to that ashram.

No order was received from anyone for building this ashram [Skandashram]. Because I was staying there, no one objected. On the contrary, they approved of it.

During the time I lived on the hill, no written order was ever obtained from anyone to make living facilities. Nor was any order obtained when repairs were carried out in some of these places.

They were not done on my authority; others did them as their own work. I did not tell them to build, nor did I prevent them. In this manner Skandashram, Virupaksha Cave and Sri Ramanasramam came into being. The other ashrams on the hill also came into existence in this way. No written orders were received for their construction.

I knew about the notice issued to Saraswathy Swami by the Devasthanam. But I do not remember the year in which it happened. I heard that the notice had been given.

During the period I was on the hill, a *vel* [spear] and a statue were in the temple [of Subramania]. They [the Devasthanam] did not object to the statue being kept in that place; their objection was to popularising it through public celebrations.

There are places to stay both at Virupaksha Cave and Guhai Namasivaya Temple. It is not known whether they contain the *samadhis* [of the two saints who founded them]. In Guhai Namasivaya there is a *lingam*. In Virupaksha Cave there is an altar. In Guhai Namasivaya *puja* and *abhishekam* are done to the *lingam*. At the altar in Virupaksha Cave, only *puja* is done. It is the popular

belief that both of these places are *samadhis*.

The time when Virupaksha Deva and Guhai Namasivaya attained *samadhi* may be around 300 or 400 years ago. I do not know when the buildings were first started in those places.

It is stated in the *Upanishads* and in the *Skanda, Linga* and *Siva Puranas* that this hill is Iswara *swarupa*.

I cannot say without referring to the books in which *Upanishad* and in which place it is stated so.

There was a *jadai* swami [a swami with long matted locks] who used to live on the hill. He died there. His body was brought down to the foot of the hill and interred. The same thing happened to Palaniswami. A *samadhi* cannot be made on the hill for anyone who dies there. They can only be burned after bringing them to the foot of the hill. Once a person died near Seven Springs [two thirds of the way up the mountain]. His *samadhi* was also made at the foot of the hill.

Jadai Swami attained *samadhi* about four of five years ago. The others attained *samadhi* after 1901 and before 1920.

I had no thought of having my mother's *samadhi* on the hill. I did not tell anyone that the *samadhi* should be made on the hill.

Next: [In the fifty years that have passed since this judgment took effect.](#)

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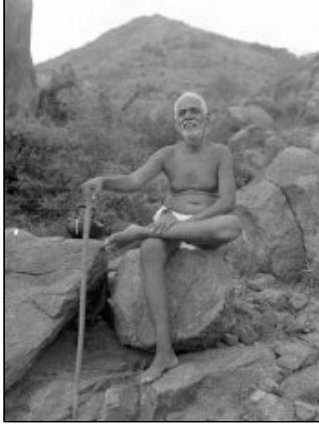
Bhagavan's Deposition on Arunachala

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Translation of this article
\(PDF\)](#)



Sri Ramana Maharshi



Arunachala

I have omitted several of Bhagavan's answers. Some of them merely repeat what he said earlier while others pertain not to Arunachala but to rather mundane matters of ashram administration.

In one of his answers Bhagavan stated that verses in the *Skanda* and *Siva Puranas* supported his assertion that Arunachala was a manifestation of God in the form of a mountain. After the hearing was over, Bhagavan selected some verses from these two works and passed them on to the court to supplement and support his evidence. Bhagavan entitled this collection of verses *Sri Arunachala Linga Pramanya Vakyanis*, which means, 'Sentences giving authoritative proof that Sri Arunachala is a *lingam*.' The verses he selected are given below.

**From the *Skanda Mahapurana*,
Maheswara Kanda, Part Three,
Arunachala Mahatmyam, First Half:
CHAPTER ONE**

Sanaka said [to Brahma]:

- 9 O Treasure of Grace! O Foremost of *Devas*! On earth there are Siva *lingams* which are divine, which are installed by human beings and *siddhas*, and which are composed of the [five] elements.
- 10 Tell me, which *lingam* in the landmass that contains India is immaculate, divine, of undefilable glory, self-originated and effulgent?

Brahma replied:

- 22 Hear how in ancient days the wonderful and effulgent Siva, who is full of motiveless grace, manifested with the name of Arunadri [one of the names of Arunachala].
- 23 Narayana and I were born from Him who transcends the universe.
- 24 Once we two, who were self-born, began to argue with other.
- 25,31 Seeing the dreadful enthusiasm with which we were

fighting with each other, Iswara, who is the embodiment of grace, rose as a column of fire between us.

Brahma said:

50 He [Lord Siva] assumed the nature of a motionless *lingam* in the form of Arunachala.

51 This indeed is the effulgent *lingam*, the sole cause of the universe, which is visible on earth and which is renowned as Arunadri.

CHAPTER TWO

Brahma and Vishnu prayed [to Lord Siva]:

31 Withdrawing Your effulgence, abide as a motionless *lingam* named Arunachala in order to bestow grace upon the world.

Brahma said:

50 He [Lord Siva] assumed the nature of a motionless *lingam* in the form of Arunachala.

51 This indeed is the effulgent *lingam*, the sole cause of the universe, which is visible on earth and which is renowned as Arunadri.

CHAPTER FOUR

Iswara said:

37 I truly abide here on earth in the form of an effulgence named Arunachala [in order to bestow] the attainment [of liberation].

38 Since It [this hill] removes the cruel accumulation of sins from all the worlds, and since bondage becomes non-existent when ones sees It, It is [named] Arunachala.

40 In ancient days, when a fight arose between Brahma and Vishnu, who were both born from a part of Me, I manifested myself in the form of an effulgence in order to remove their delusion.

43 At their further request I, who was in the form of effulgence, became the motionless *lingam* named Arunadri.

CHAPTER FIVE

Devi said to Gautama:

24 Siva told me: 'I abide [on earth] with the name Arunachala,' and said that I should hear the glory of Arunachala from your lips.

Gautama said:

42,43 In ancient days Brahma and Vishnu, who had come into existence from a part of the effulgence of Siva, but who had become egotistical, fought with a desire to conquer each other.

43,44 In order to subdue the pride of these two, who were fighting in this manner, Sadasiva, who is worthy to be meditated on by yogis, assumed the form of a column of fire without beginning, middle or end, and stood between them, illuminating the ten directions.

47

At their further request, Devesa [Siva, the Lord of the devas] assumed the form of a motionless *lingam*

[now] renowned as Arunadri. Tranquil He shines.

CHAPTER SIX

Iswara said:

- 21 I abide on earth as the form of Arunachala.
- 22 That effulgent form alone is called Arunachala.
- 23 This fiery effulgent form, unmanifest and of the nature of limitless glory, cooled down in order to protect the world.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The *devas* said:

- 9 O Bhagavan! O Arunadrise [Arunachala]! You who do good to the whole world! Although You are of the form of fire, You shine in the world, having become tranquil.

Gautama said:

- 5 Having been prayed to by the *devas*, Sriman Arunadrise gradually cooled down and became perfectly tranquil as Arunachala in order to protect the world.

CHAPTER EIGHT

- 20 You [Lord Siva] are seen on earth as the famous Sonadri [another name of Arunachala].
- 17 Nowhere else on earth have I seen even one *lingam* in the form of a hill.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Brahma said:

- 42 This is Sadasiva Himself in the form of Arunachala, which is seen even as the supreme effulgence, the cause of creation, sustenance and dissolution.
- 44 This effulgent *lingam* is worshipped by all the *devas*. Because of this, the earth is considered to possess more dharma [than any other world].

From the Second Half of the *Skanda Mahapurana*:

CHAPTER FOUR

Nandikeswara said:

- 12 There God, Sambhu, the one who does what is good for the world, has Himself assumed the form of a hill and abides with the name Arunachala.
- 14 This hill, which is Parameswara Himself, is considered by *maharishis* to be superior to Sumeru, Kailasa and Mandara.
- 58 Neither Meru nor Kailasa nor Mandara are equal to Arunadri; they are abodes [of Lord Siva] filled with huge rocks, whereas this [Arunachala] is Girisa [the Lord of the Hill, one of the names of Siva] Himself.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Siva said:

- 27 For the welfare [of the world], may My effulgent form, which is motionless and eternal, abide here forever with the name Arunadri.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Gautama said:

- 21 This Arunadri is the hill of fire itself in a concealed

form.

**From the Siva Mahapurana,
Vidyeshwara Samhita:
CHAPTER NINE**

Iswara said:

- 21 Since this *lingam* rose up as a hill of fire, it shall be renowned as Arunachala.
- 41,42 Since this formless column, which reveals My nature as *Brahman*, possesses the characteristics of a *lingam*, It shall be My *lingam*.

Since the *Skanda Mahapurana* and the *Siva Mahapurana* are two of the eighteen principal *Puranas*, these verses should have been enough to convince the court that Bhagavan's assertions about the sanctity of Arunachala were backed up by an authoritative scriptural source. Unfortunately, the issue at stake was not the sanctity of the mountain but the ownership of it.

Property disputes in India tend to be protracted affairs, and this one was no exception. The final judgement was handed down in July 1940, more than six years after the original notification. The two parties seemed to have reached a settlement out of court, the terms of which were incorporated in the court's decision. The Devasthanam reluctantly accepted that the Government was the sole owner of the hill. In return the Government granted the Devasthanam the right to maintain and repair all the religious property on Arunachala and to enjoy all the income from the sale of the grass that grew there. The Devasthanam was also given the right to collect dead wood from the hill and to graze its cattle there. The Government reserved for itself the right to authorise the construction of any new buildings on the hill.

In the fifty years that have passed since this judgment took effect, Tiruvannamalai has grown enormously. The town now has a population of over 100,000, all living at the foot of the hill, with many more living in outlying villages. As the population increased, nearly all the local forests were felled to meet the ever-increasing demand for timber and firewood. Arunachala was not spared. Nearly all the old trees on the hill were cut long ago, and sporadic reforestation projects in the last few years have failed to repair more than a fraction of the damage. The temple, although constrained by a lack of finances, has attempted to fulfil its obligation to the properties on the hill that it has been appointed to maintain. The other party, the Government, was, until the 1980s, quite successful in preventing new settlements from springing up on the hill and spoiling its sanctity. Unfortunately, neither party has been able to prevent or slow down the progressive environmental degradation of Arunachala's slopes, nor have they been able to stop the annual fires, started by the local grass-cutters, which consume most of the mountain, destroying large tracts of vegetation and wildlife. The forests of Bhagavan's youth have long since gone. With the local population still rapidly expanding, it will need a minor miracle to bring them back.

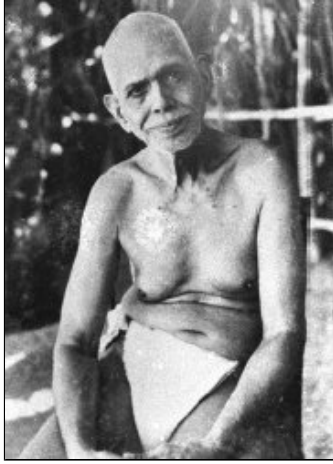
'I' and 'I-I' - A Reader's Query

(First published in *The Mountain Path*, 1991, pp. 79-88.)

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Sri Ramana Maharshi

Sometime last year I received a letter from Professor James E. Royster of Cleveland State University, USA, which contained the following interesting question:

My reason for writing is to raise a question with you that has long puzzled me. I have been reading Ramana Maharshi for about twenty years and frequently find him using the expression. 'I-I' but I'm not clear on his meaning. Why 'I-I' rather than simply 'I'? I can think of many possible meanings but I am not at all sure what Ramana intended. Is it to suggest that the sense of separate self (or self-consciousness) arises only in relationship to another sense of separate self? Or that the individual *atman* is derived from ("subtracted" from) the Absolute *Atman*, *Brahman Nirguna*? Does 'I-I' refer to the ego or the Universal Self? My guesses and interpretations go on and on.

If you can shed some light on this issue I will be most appreciative. Perhaps there has been an article in *The Mountain Path* or elsewhere that takes up this question.

This question has not, to my knowledge, been discussed in any great detail in either *The Mountain Path* or any other ashram publication. I therefore sent the following detailed reply to the professor. Since I suspect that some devotees may disagree with some of my conclusions, I should say in advance that this is not intended to be a definitive explanation. It merely reflects my own views.

* * *

Bhagavan never used the term 'I-I' to denote the mind, the ego or the individual self, nor did he intend it, as Professor Royster speculates, to indicate that there is any relationship between the individual 'I' and the Self. On the contrary, Bhagavan makes it clear on many occasions that 'I-I' is an experience not of the ego but of the Self. Verse thirty of *Ulladu Narpadu* is quite emphatic about this:

Questioning 'Who am I?' within one's mind, when one reaches the Heart, the individual 'I' sinks crestfallen, and at once reality manifests itself as 'I-I'. Though it reveals itself thus, it is not the ego 'I' but the perfect being the Self Absolute. (1)

Verses nineteen and twenty of *Upadesa Undiyar* describe the same process in almost identical terms:

19. 'Whence does the 'I' arise?' Seek this within. The 'I' then vanishes. This is the pursuit of wisdom.

20. Where the 'I' vanished, there appears an 'I-I' by itself.

This is the infinite. (2)

Although Bhagavan is here clearly equating the experience of 'I-I' with the experience of the Self, one should be wary of jumping to the conclusion that he is saying in these three verses that the 'I-I' experience occurs after the final realisation of the Self. Why? Because on many other occasions Bhagavan told devotees that the 'I-I' experience was merely a prelude to realisation and not the realisation itself. I shall return to the question of whether the 'I-I' experience can be equated with Self-realisation later in this article, but first I feel that it would be more profitable to examine some of the quotations in which Bhagavan gave detailed descriptions of the 'I-I'.

Bhagavan frequently used the Sanskrit phrase *aham sphurana* to indicate the 'I-I' consciousness or experience. *Aham* means 'I' and *sphurana* can be translated as 'radiation, emanation, or pulsation'. When he explained what this term meant he indicated that it is an impermanent experience of the Self in which the mind has been temporarily transcended. This distinction between the temporary experience of the 'I-I' and the permanent state of Self-realisation that follows it is well brought out in the question-and-answer version of *Vichara Sangraham (Self-Enquiry)*:

Therefore, leaving the corpse-like body as an actual corpse and remaining without even uttering the word 'I' by mouth, if one now keenly enquires, 'What is it that rises as 'I'? then in the Heart a certain soundless *sphurana*, 'I-I', will shine forth of its own accord. It is an awareness that is single and undivided, the thoughts which are many and divided having disappeared. If one remains still without leaving it, even the *sphurana* - having completely annihilated the sense of the individuality, the form of the ego, 'I am the body' - will itself in the end subside, just like the flame that catches the camphor. This alone is said to be liberation by great ones and scriptures. (3)

This answer can be taken to be an amplification of and a commentary on the three verses already quoted, for the same sequence of events is described, but at greater length; after the source of the 'I'-thought is sought for, the 'I'-thought subsides, disappears and is replaced by the *aham sphurana*. What this longer quotation makes clear is that even this *sphurana* of 'I-I' has to subside before the final and permanent stage of Self-realisation is attained.

Bhagavan's use of the word *sphurana* in this quotation once puzzled Devaraja Mudaliar. He therefore asked Bhagavan about it and received a detailed, illuminating answer:

I have always had doubt about what exactly the word

sphurana means [in question three of *Vichara Sangraham*]. So I asked Bhagavan and he said, 'It means "Which shines or illuminates"'. I asked, 'Is it not a sound we hear?' Bhagavan said, 'Yes, we may say it is a sound we feel or become aware of'. He also referred to the dictionary and said, 'The word means "throbbing", "springing on the memory", "flashing across the mind"'. Thus both sound and light may be implied in the word *sphurana*. Everything has come from light and sound.' I asked Bhagavan what it is that 'shines', whether it is the ego or the Self. He said that it was neither the one nor the other, but something in between the two, that it is something that is a combination of the 'I' (Self) and the 'I'-thought (ego) and that the Self is without even this *sphurana*.(4)

Another more philosophical explanation of the *aham sphurana* and 'I-I' can be found in one of the later answers of *Vichara Sangraham*. This is a most interesting answer because it can serve as a commentary on the first half of one of Bhagavan's most famous verses. In *Sri Ramana Gita*, chapter two, verse two, Bhagavan states that, 'In the interior of the heart-cave, *Brahman* alone shines in the form of *Atman* with direct immediacy as I, as I.' (5)

Although this verse, and particularly its second half, has been extensively discussed in the Ramana literature, no commentators, so far as I am aware, have mentioned Bhagavan's own written explanation of the 'I-I' shining in the Heart.

D: It was stated [in your previous answer] that *Brahman* is manifest as the Self in the form of 'I-I' in the Heart. To facilitate an understanding of this statement, can it be still further explained?

M: Is it not within the experience of all that during deep sleep, swoon etc, there is no knowledge whatsoever, that is, neither Self-knowledge nor other knowledge. Afterwards, when there is experience of the form 'I have woken up from sleep' or 'I have recovered from swoon' - is that not a mode of specific knowledge that has arisen from the aforementioned state? This specific knowledge is called *vijnana*. This *vijnana* becomes manifest only as pertaining either to the Self or the not-Self, and not by itself. When it pertains to the Self it is called true knowledge, knowledge in the form of that mental mode whose object is the Self or knowledge which has for its content the impartite [Self], and when it relates to the not-Self it is called ignorance. The state of this *vijnana* when it pertains to the Self and is manifest in the form of the Self is said to be the *aham sphurana*. This *sphurana* cannot remain independently, leaving the Reality. It is this *sphurana* that serves as the mark for the direct experience of the Real. Yet this by itself cannot constitute the state of being the Real. That, depending on which this manifestation takes place, is the basic Reality, which is also called *prajnana* [pure consciousness]. The Vedantic text '*prajnanam brahma*' [Brahman is pure consciousness] teaches the same truth.(6)

Here an interesting phenomenon needs to be commented on. In his writings Bhagavan has made several relatively brief statements

(7) in which he equates the 'I-I' experience with the Self. At first sight they appear to be descriptions of the state of Self-realisation, but when they are read in conjunction with the long explanations of the 'I-I' that can be found elsewhere in his writings (8) and in his verbal comments, it is possible to see in these verses a description of the impermanent *aham sphurana* rather than the permanent state of realisation. This is an unusual interpretation, but I believe that it is a sustainable one. However, I would not go so far as to say that it is the only legitimate way of interpreting these verses.

In the previous quotation from *Vichara Sangraham* the 'I-I' is defined as being a clear knowledge (*vidyana*) of the Self in which the mind, still existing, clings tightly to its source and is permeated by emanations of 'I'-ness radiating from the Self.

Ganapati Muni may have had this particular answer in mind when he wrote to Bhagavan and asked the following question: 'Is abidance in *vidyana* a means for gradually attaining the perfect, or is it not? If it is not certainly a means for that, then for what purpose is it?' (9)

In his reply Bhagavan repeated the relevant parts of the answer from *Vichara Sangraham* but he also added some remarks on how self-enquiry leads to *aham sphurana* and how abidance in *aham sphurana*, or 'I-I', leads to Self-realisation:

The 'I'-thought which rises in this manner [by catching hold of something] appears in the form of the three *gunas*, and of these three the *rajas* and *tamas* aspects cling to and identify with the body. The remaining one, which is pure *sattva*, is alone the natural characteristic of the mind, and this stands clinging to the reality. However, in the pure *sattvic* state, the 'I'-thought is no longer really a thought, it is the Heart itself. The state in which the pure *sattva* mind shines clinging to the Self is called *aham sphurana*. The source to which this *sphurana* clings alone is called the reality or pure consciousness. When the mind, having pure *sattva* as its characteristic, remain attending to the *aham sphurana*, which is the sign of the forthcoming direct experience of the Self, the downward-facing Heart becomes upward-facing and remains in the form of That. This aforesaid attention to the source of the *aham sphurana* alone is the path. When thus attended to, Self, the reality, alone will remain shining in the centre of the Heart as I-am-I. (10)

The quotations given so far should make it clear what Bhagavan was referring to when he spoke of the 'I-I' experience, but they fail to address one of Professor Royster's principal questions: why does Bhagavan use the term 'I-I' rather than 'I'? The term 'I' is clearly inadequate and confusing since it denotes either the Self or the ego rather than the *aham sphurana* which is, as Bhagavan says, 'neither the one nor the other'. A. R. Natarajan in his commentary on *Sri Ramana Gita* suggests that 'to denote the continuous nature of the throb of consciousness, Ramana repeats the words as "I-I"'. (11) This is certainly plausible. An alternative explanation, suggested by Sadhu Om, (12) can be derived from the rules of Tamil grammar. In simple Tamil sentences the present tense of the verb 'to be' is usually omitted. Thus, the expression '*nan-nan*' ('I-I' in Tamil) would generally be taken to mean 'I am I' by a Tamilian. This interpretation would make 'I-I' an emphatic statement of Self-

awareness akin to the biblical 'I am that I am' which Bhagavan occasionally said summarised the whole of Vedanta. Bhagavan himself has said that he used the term 'I-I' to denote the import of the word 'I'. This explanation appears in both *Upadesa Undiyar* (verse 21) and in the talks that precede *Sat Darshana Bhashya*.(13)

Whichever explanation one chooses, either these or others, one should avoid those which postulate that the experience is called 'I-I' because it radiates in discrete pulses, for Bhagavan was quite emphatic that the experience was continuous and unbroken. For example, in the essay version of *Vichara Sangraham* he wrote: 'Underlying the unceasing flow of varied thoughts there arises the continuous unbroken awareness, silent and spontaneous, as 'I-I' in the Heart.'(14)

I would like now to address more fully the question of whether the 'I-I' experience, as defined by Bhagavan, is present after realisation takes place. Most devotees who are familiar with Bhagavan's teachings would have no hesitation in asserting that this is so. If pressed to provide evidence to support their point of view, they would probably quote the verses from *Ulladu Narpadu* and *Upadesa Undiyar* that I have already cited, and probably add verse twenty of *Upadesa Saram*. They would be quite justified in doing so, for it is possible to translate and interpret all these verses in such a way that their meaning would be that the 'I-I' experience is a consequence and not a precursor of Self-realisation. To see how this is so, one must look at the verbs in these verses and examine what they mean in their original languages. For the sake of convenience I will give the verses again with the relevant verbs printed in italics.

1. Questioning 'Who am I?' within one's mind, when one reaches the Heart the individual 'I' *sinks crestfallen*, and at once reality manifests itself as 'I-I'. Though it reveals itself thus, it is not the ego 'I', but the perfect being, the Self Absolute. (*Ulladu Narpadu*, verse 30)
2. 'Whence does this 'I' arise? Seek this within. This 'I' then *vanishes*. This is the pursuit of wisdom. *Where the 'I' vanished*, there appears an 'I-I' by itself. This is the infinite [*poornam*]. (*Upadesa Undiyar*, verses 19 and 20).
3. Where this 'I' *vanished and merged* in its source, there appears spontaneously and continuously an 'I-I'. This is the Heart, the infinite Supreme Being. (*Upadesa Saram*, verse 20).(15)

The first two italicised verbs, 'sinks crest-fallen' and 'vanishes' are translations of the Tamil phrase *talai-sayndidum*, which literally means, 'will bow its head'. In ordinary usage it means 'will humble itself', 'sinks crest-fallen', or 'will bow its head in shame'. However, in colloquial usage it can also mean 'will die'. If this colloquial usage is preferred, both verses will have as their meaning that the 'I-I' will only manifest after the death of the individual 'I'. Sadhu Om in his translations has preferred the colloquial usage 'will die', but other translators have opted for variations on 'sinks crest-fallen'. This may seem like pointless pedantry, but a crucial distinction is at stake: if the verb chosen indicates a permanent extinction of the ego, then the 'I-I' arises as a consequence of Self-realisation; but if the chosen verb indicates that the 'I' had only temporarily subsided

(e.g. 'vanished', 'merged', 'disappeared', etc.) then Bhagavan is indicating that the 'I-I' manifests before realisation. It is of course possible to have it both ways and say that the 'I-I' is experienced both before and after realisation. Adherents of this school of thought would probably say that the *Upadesa Undiyar* and *Ulladu Narpadu* verses describe the post-realisation 'I-I' experience whereas the *Vichara Sangraham* quotations refer to the *aham sphurana* experience which precedes it.

The third italicised phrase, 'where the 'I' vanished', is a translation of the Tamil word '*ondru*' which means 'where it merges' or 'where it becomes one with'. Since the union referred to in this verse can be dissolved by the re-emergence of the 'I', the term *ondru* does not imply a permanent extinction of the 'I'. However, those who support the thesis that the 'I-I' manifests after the permanent eradication of the 'I' would probably point to Bhagavan's Sanskrit translation of this verse. In it he uses the word *nasa* (for the fourth italicised verb, 'vanished and merged') where the word *ondru* is used in the Tamil original. This has been variously translated as 'destroyed', 'annihilated', and 'perished', all terms which indicate a permanent destruction of the 'I'. It is quite permissible though to translate *nasa* as 'disappear' or 'vanish', and indeed several translators have done so.⁽¹⁶⁾ Since one should select a meaning that is consonant with the idea expressed in the original Tamil, I feel that 'vanish' or 'disappear' is preferable. The implications of words such as 'destroy' or 'perish' are not present in the original text.

Next: Now the body is inert, devoid of consciousness, while I am full of awareness

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(1) *Truth Revealed*, v. 30, 1982 ed.

(2) *Upadesa Saram* translated by B. V. Narasimhaswami. Although the work is entitled *Upadesa Saram*, it is actually a translation of *Upadesa Undiyar*, *Upadesa Saram* is Bhagavan's Sanskrit rendering of *Upadesa Undiyar*.

(3) Question three of *Vichara Sangraham*, translated by Sadhu Om, taken from page 98 of *The Mountain Path*, 1982. The word order has been slightly changed in this version.

(4) *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 23rd April, 1945.

(5) *Sri Ramana Gita*, 6th ed.

(6) Question and answer no. 32 from *Vichara Sangraham*. Part of the translation has been taken from the booklet *Self-Enquiry* and part from *The Mountain Path*, 1982, p. 98.

(7) *Upadesa Undiyar*, vv. 19 and 20, *Ulladu Narpadu*, V. 30, and *Sri Ramana Gita*, ch. 2, v. 2.

(8) *Vichara Sangraham*, answers 3 and 30.

(9) 'Sri Bhagavan's Letter to Ganapati Muni,' *The Mountain Path*, 1982, pp. 95-101.

(10) *Ibid*.

(11) *Sri Ramana Gita*, by A. R. Natarajan, p.20.

(12) *Upadesa Undiyar*, translated by Sadhu Om and Michael James, p. 20.

(13) *Sat Darshana Bhashya*, 7th ed. p.iii. I was told a few years ago by Sri K. Natesan, who was present in the old hall when Kapali Sastri read out the manuscript version of *Sat Darshana Bhashya*, that Bhagavan himself made the author delete the original phrase (Sri K. Natesan can no longer remember what it was) and replace it with 'import of'.

(14) *Vichara Sangraham*, essay version, ch. 1.

(15) Taken from *The Maharishi's Way*, a translation of *Upadesa Saram* by D.S. Sastri, 1989 ed., p. 38. The sources of the other two quotations have been cited in footnotes 1 and 2.

(16) In addition to D. M. Sastri, two other published authors have translated *nasa* in verse twenty of *Upadesa Saram* as 'vanished': Swami Atmananda in *Light on*

Religious Practices, p. 29 and Swami Bhoomananda Tirtha in *Upadesa Sara of Maharshi Ramana*, p. 11.



Sri Ramana Maharshi

There are two other translations that can add a little evidence to this debate. In the 1920s Lakshmana Sarma translated *Ulladu Narpadu* into Sanskrit under Bhagavan's supervision. He had to recast each verse several times in order to satisfy Bhagavan that his translation was completely accurate. When verse thirty was translated, Lakshmana Sarma translated *talai-sayndidum* as 'bows its head in shame'([17](#)) and received Bhagavan's imprimatur on it. Many years later, Major Chadwick translated *Upadesa Saram* into English and had his manuscript corrected by Bhagavan. In this version Bhagavan approved of the word 'disappears' as a translation of the Sanskrit word *nasa* in verse twenty.([18](#))

To sum up this linguistic excursion: the verses on 'I-I' that Bhagavan wrote are open to two interpretations. They can be taken either to mean that the 'I-I' is experienced as a consequence of realisation or as a precursor to it. My own view, and I would stress that it is only a personal opinion, is that the evidence points to it being a precursor only. In justification of this view I would say that,

1. In his lengthy explanations of the 'I-I' Bhagavan always speaks of it as a temporary experience;
2. In a long conversation with S. S. Cohen that will appear later, Bhagavan twice states that the 'I-I' consciousness is different from the *sahaja nirvikalpa samadhi* state, that is, the natural state of the *jnani*;
3. Bhagavan's Tamil and Sanskrit verses on this subject can all be interpreted in such a way that they support this view.

I should like now to raise an interesting question, and, if possible answer it. If the 'I-I' or *aham sphurana* experience occurs immediately before realisation, and not after it, is there any evidence to show that Bhagavan himself went through such an experience on the day of his own realisation? I think there is, although it is somewhat flimsy. I will begin by quoting one other verse that Bhagavan wrote:

Therefore on diving deep upon the quest
'Who am 'I' and from whence?'

thoughts disappear
And consciousness of Self then flashes forth
As the 'I-I' within the cavity
Of every seeker's Heart (19)

If one adds this to the previous similar quotations I have already cited,(20) there are now four written accounts by Bhagavan that have in common an almost identical theme; as a result of self-enquiry, the 'I'-thought subsides, disappears and is replaced by the 'I-I' 'flashing forth' in the Heart. What authority does Bhagavan have for saying this? I would answer by making the novel suggestion that these writings are autobiographical in nature and that Bhagavan is recording what happened to him on his enlightenment day in 1896. I would support this view by comparing the introductory comments from *Vichara Sangraham*, answer three, to the well-known account of the death experience which has been printed in many ashram books.

1. Therefore, leaving the corpse-like body as an actual corpse, and remaining without even uttering the word 'I' by mouth, if one keenly enquires, 'What is it that rises as 'I'? (21)
2. I lay with my limbs stretched out still as though *rigor mortis* had set in and imitated a corpse so as to give greater reality to the enquiry. I held my breath and kept my lips tightly closed so that no sound could escape, so that neither the word 'I' nor any other word could be uttered. 'Well then,' I said to myself, 'this body is dead But with the death of the body, am I dead? Is the body 'I'? (22)

The similarities cannot be ignored. Indeed, since the preamble to the *Vichara Sangraham* answer is so close to the published accounts of his death experience, it is possible that the remainder of the answer (cited in full earlier in this article) is also autobiographical. If this whole answer is merely a thinly-disguised account of Bhagavan's own Self-realisation, then one can say that he experienced the *aham sphurana* as a consequence of his enquiry, and that the *aham sphurana* finally subsided, leaving the full, permanent and *sphurana*-less experience of the Self. No hint of this can be found in B. V. Narasimhaswami's account of the death experience, but in Krishna Bhikshu's Telugu biography Bhagavan takes up the story of what happened after he had begun his enquiry into the nature of the 'I'.

Now the body is inert, devoid of consciousness, while I am full of awareness. Therefore death is for the inert body. This 'I' is indestructible awareness. The knowledge that remains when the body gives up its affairs and when there are no sensory workings is not sensory knowledge. This *aham sphurana* is direct knowledge, Self-experience, self-effulgent and not imaginary.(23)

In 1945 Bhagavan confirmed that he had experienced the *aham sphurana* on the day of his realisation. In a conversation with Swami Rishikeshananda in November that year he remarked: 'In the vision of death I experienced at Madurai, all my senses were numbed, but my *aham sphurana* was clearly evident to me '(24) In

neither Krishna Bhikshu's nor Anantha Murthy's account does Bhagavan go on to say that the *aham sphurana* subsided, leaving the full and permanent state of Self-realisation. However, since he on many other occasions asserted that the *aham sphurana* was a temporary experience and that it must subside and disappear before realisation can take place, it is reasonable to infer that he did in fact experience the sequence of events described in *Vichara Sangraham*, answer three, on the day of his own realisation.

There is one other point that can be mentioned in passing. Though Bhagavan rarely talked about it, there appears, occasionally, to be a cosmological aspect to this usage of the term *aham sphurana*. On one occasion he said, 'The Supreme Being is unmanifest and the first sign of manifestation is *aham sphurana*' (25). In what may be an amplification of this unusual statement, Bhagavan once told Devaraja Mudaliar: '

both sound and light may be implied in the word *sphurana*. Everything has come from light and sound.'

Explaining how the Self is mere light and how it is both the word or sound and also that out of which word or sound originally came, Bhagavan said, 'Man has three bodies, the gross, the one made of the five elements, the *sukshma* or subtle one made of *manas* [mind] and *prana*, and the *jiva*. Similarly, even Iswara has three bodies. All the manifest universe is his gross body, light and sound are his subtle body, and the Self is his *jiva*.'(26)

According to this explanation the *aham sphurana* can be viewed as the subtle body of Iswara, the source or springboard from which the material world springs or evolves. However, this is somewhat fanciful, being sharply at variance with Bhagavan's mainstream ideas on creation.

As a conclusion, it will be appropriate to include an extract from *Guru Ramana*. In one of his conversations with Bhagavan, S. S. Cohen asked several questions about the nature of the 'I-I'. In his answers, Bhagavan made several interesting comments, many of which are not recorded elsewhere in the Ramana literature.

Mr C: *Vivekachudamani* speaks of the 'I-I' consciousness as eternally shining in the Heart, but no one is aware of it.

Bhagavan: Yes, all men without exception have it, in whatever state they may be - the waking, dreaming and dreamless sleep - and whether they are conscious of it or not.

C: In the 'Talks' section of *Sat Darshana Bhashya*, the 'I-I' is referred to as the Absolute Consciousness, yet Bhagavan once told me that any realisation before *Sahaja Nirvikalpa* is intellectual.

B: Yes, the 'I-I' consciousness is the Absolute. Though it comes before *Sahaja*, there is in it as in *Sahaja* itself the subtle intellect; (27) the difference being that in the latter [*Sahaja*] the sense of forms disappear, which is not the case in the former.

This answer suggests an interesting distinction between the 'I-I' consciousness and *kevala nirvikalpa samadhi*, both of which, according to Bhagavan, are temporary experiences of the Self. *Nirvikalpa* means 'no differences', so in *kevala nirvikalpa samadhi* no names or forms are perceived. However, on the basis of this

answer, one can say that forms are still perceived during the 'I-I' experience.

In his writings Bhagavan has said that self-enquiry leads to the experience of *aham sphurana*, and that abidance in the *aham sphurana* leads on to a full realisation of the *sahaja nirvikalpa* state. He was less positive about *kevala nirvikalpa samadhi*, often saying that it was a temporary state, and that the mind would eventually re-emerge from it. He generally tried to discourage devotees from trying to reach this state since he regarded it as something akin to an unproductive detour.⁽²⁸⁾ One can infer from his remarks and writings that self-enquiry, properly undertaken, bypasses this *kevala nirvikalpa* state completely and reaches the *sahaja* state via the alternate route of the *aham sphurana* experience. Mr. Cohen received confirmation of this as he continued his conversation with Bhagavan:

C: Bhagavan, you said yesterday that there exists in the human body a hole as small as a pinpoint, from which consciousness always bubbles out to the body. Is it open or shut?

B: It is always shut, being the knot of ignorance which ties the body to consciousness. When the mind drops away in the temporary *Kevala Nirvikalpa* it opens but shuts again. In *Sahaja* it remains always open.

C: How is it during the experience of 'I-I' consciousness?

B: This consciousness is the key which opens it permanently.

This opening process may be the same one that was described by Bhagavan in his letter to Ganapati Muni, which I quoted earlier. Part of it read: 'When the mind having pure *sattva* as its characteristic remains attending to the *aham sphurana*, which is the sign of the forthcoming direct experience of the Self, the downward-facing Heart becomes upward-facing and remains in the form of That.' If 'the Heart becomes upward-facing' is the equivalent of this small consciousness-emitting hole opening, then this is another instance of Bhagavan saying that abidance in the *aham sphurana* is the way to make the Heart open permanently.

When the Heart is permanently open, the world, which was previously assumed to be external, is experienced not as separate names and forms, but as one's own Self, as the immanent *Brahman*. In *nirvikalpa samadhi*, according to Bhagavan, the Heart temporarily opens to admit the mind, but then closes again. Thus the *nirvikalpa* experience of the Self is both limited (in so far as it is temporary) and 'internal'. Because the Heart remains closed, the *sahaja* experience of the world being *Brahman* is absent. There is merely an internal awareness of one's real nature that lasts as long as the duration of the *samadhi*. As mentioned before, in the *aham sphurana* experience, external awareness is retained, but names and forms continue to be perceived as names and forms until the 'I' finally dies in the Heart.

One final point needs to be stressed. In *Ulladu Narpadu*, *Upadesa Undiyar* and *Vichara Sangraham* Bhagavan makes the point that it is self-enquiry that leads to *aham sphurana*. Nowhere is it mentioned in these texts that other methods lead to this state. This point is made again in the concluding section of Mr. Cohen's talk with Bhagavan:

C: How to reach that Centre where what you call the ultimate consciousness- the 'I-I' - arises? Is it by simply thinking 'Who am I'?

B: Yes, it will take you up. You must do it with a calm mind - mental calmness is essential.

C: How does that consciousness manifest when that Centre - the Heart - is reached? Will I recognise it?

B: Certainly, as pure consciousness, free from all thought. It is pure unbroken awareness of your own Self, rather of Being - there is no mistaking it when pure.

C: Is the vibratory movement of the Centre felt simultaneously with the experience of Pure Consciousness, or before, or after it?

B: They are both one and the same. But *sphurana* can be felt in a subtle way even when meditation has sufficiently established and deepened, and the ultimate consciousness is very near, or during a sudden fright or great shock, when the mind comes to a standstill. It draws attention to itself, so that the meditator's mind, rendered sensitive by calmness, may become aware of it, gravitate toward it, and finally plunge into it, the Self.

C: Is the 'I-I' consciousness Self-realisation?

B: It is a prelude to it: when it becomes permanent *Sahaja* it is Self-realisation, Liberation. (29)

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(17) *Revelation* by 'Who', 1980 ed., v. 35. Because of additional verses included at the beginning of the text, Who's numbering system differs from other translators. Verse 30 becomes verse 35 in his version.

(18) *The Poems of Sri Ramana Maharshi*, by Major Chadwick, 3rd ed., p. 15. The original notebook with Bhagavan's handwritten corrections is kept in the ashram archives.

(19) *Atma Vidya Kirtanam*, v. 2, taken from *Collected Works*.

(20) *Ulladu Narpadu*, v. 30, *Upadesa Undiyar*, vv. 19 and 20, *Vichara Sangraham*, answer 3.

(21) *Vichara Sangraham*, answer 3.

(22) *Ramana Maharishi and the Path of Self Knowledge*, ch. 2. In an alternative version (*The Mountain Path*, 1982, p. 68) Bhagavan asks himself, just prior to his Self-realisation, 'What was this "I"? Is it the body? Who called himself the "I"?' This version, in which such a definite act of self-enquiry takes place, is even closer to the *Vichara Sangraham* version.

(23) *Ramana Leela*, 7th ed., pp. 20-21.

(24) *The Life and Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi* by T. S. Anantha Murthy, 1972, ed., p. 6-7.

(25) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 518.

(26) *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 24th March, 1945. These remarks are part of Bhagavan's explanation of the word *sphurana* in question three of *Vichara Sangraham*.

(27) When Bhagavan mentioned that the subtle intellect remains in the *sahaja* state, he was referring to the *vinjanamayakosa*, or 'the sheath of pure intellect'. He would occasionally say that the *jnani* keeps in contact with the world via this sheath although such statements do not sit well with his assertion that the *jnani* has no mind. See *Guru Ramana*, 7th ed., pp. 100-101 for further details.

(28) See, for example, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharishi*, no. 54, in which Bhagavan notes that one can get stuck in *nirvikalpa samadhi* for years without making any progress.

(29) *Guru Ramana*, 1974 ed. pp. 81-3.

Somerset Maugham and *The Razor's Edge*

(First published in *The Mountain Path*, 1988, pp. 239-45.)

In January 1938 Somerset Maugham, the British novelist, visited Sri Ramanashram for a few hours. The brief contact he had with Bhagavan inspired Maugham so much, he decided to use him as the model for a fictional Guru in *The Razor's Edge*, a novel of his that was published a few years later in 1944. Maugham also wrote a non-fiction account of his visit in an essay entitled 'The Saint', which was published twenty years after the event in 1958. The following account, which is taken from this essay, records Maugham's impressions of this meeting with Bhagavan.



Somerset Maugham

In the course of my journey to India I went to Madras and there met some people who seemed interested to know what I had been doing in India. I told them about the holy men who had suffered me to visit them, and they immediately proposed to take me to see a Swami who was the most celebrated and the most revered then in India. They called him the Maharshi.

I did not hesitate to fall in with the suggestion and, a few days later, early one morning, we set out. After a dull hot drive along a dusty, bumpy road, dusty because the heavy wheels of ox-drawn wagons had left deep ruts in it, we reached the ashram. We were told that the Maharshi would see us in a little while. We had brought a basket of fruit to present to him, as I was informed that it was the graceful custom, and sat down to the picnic luncheon we had been sensible enough to put in the car. Suddenly, I fainted dead away. I was carried into a hut and laid on a pallet bed. I do not know how long I remained unconscious but presently I recovered. I felt, however, too ill to move. The Maharshi was told what had happened, and that I was not well enough to come into the hall in which he ordinarily sat, so, after some time, followed by two or three disciples, he came into the hut into which I had been taken.

What follows is what I wrote in my notebook on my return to Madras. The Maharshi was of average height for an Indian, of a dark honey colour with close-cropped white hair and a close-cropped white beard. He was plump rather than stout. Though he wore nothing but an exiguous loincloth he looked neat, very clean and almost dapper. He had a slight limp, and he walked slowly, leant on a stick. His mouth was somewhat large, with thickish lips and the whites of his eyes were bloodshot. He bore himself with naturalness and at the same time with dignity. His mien was cheerful smiling, polite; he did not give the impression of a scholar, but rather of a sweet-natured old peasant. He uttered a few words of cordial greeting and sat on the ground not far from the pallet on which I lay.

After the first few minutes during which his eyes with a gentle benignity rested on my face, he ceased to look at me, but, with a sidelong stare of peculiar fixity, gazed, as it were, over my shoulder. His body was absolutely still,

but now and then one of his feet tapped lightly on the earthen floor. He remained thus, motionless, for perhaps a quarter of an hour; and they told me later that he was concentrating in meditation upon me. Then he came to, if I may so put it, and again looked at me. He asked me if I wished to say anything to him, or ask any question. I was feeling weak and ill and said so; whereupon he smiled and said, 'Silence is also conversation'. He turned his head away slightly and resumed his concentrated meditation, again looking, as it were, over my shoulder. No one said a word; the other persons in the hut, standing by the door, kept their eyes riveted upon him. After another quarter of an hour, he got up bowed, smiled farewell, and slowly, leaning on his stick, followed by his disciples, he limped out of the hut.

I do not know whether it was the consequence of the rest or of the Swami's mediation, but I certainly felt much better and in a little while I was well enough to go into the hall where he sat by day and slept at night. It was a long, bare room, fifty feet long, it seemed to me, and about half as broad. There were windows all around it, but the overhanging roof dimmed the light. The Swami sat on a low dais, on which was a tiger skin, and in front of him was a small brazier in which incense burnt. Now and again a disciple stepped forward and lit another stick. The scent was agreeable to the nostrils. The faithful, inhabitants of the ashram or habitual visitors, sat cross-legged on the floor. Some read, others meditated. Presently, two strangers, Hindus, came in with a basket of fruit, prostrated themselves and presented their offerings. The Swami accepted it with a slight inclination of the head and motioned to a disciple to take it away. He spoke to the strangers and then, with another inclination of the head, signified to them that they were to withdraw. They prostrated themselves once more and went to sit among the other devotees. The Swami entered that blissful state of meditation on the infinite which is called *Samadhi*. A little shiver seemed to pass through those present. The silence was intense and impressive. You felt that something strange was taking place that made you inclined to hold your breath. After a while I tiptoed out of the hall.

Later I heard that my fainting had given rise to fantastic rumours. The news of it was carried throughout India. It was ascribed to the awe that overcame me at the prospect of going into the presence of the holy man. Some said that his influence, acting upon me before I even saw him, had caused me to be rapt for a while in the infinite. When Hindus asked about it, I was content to smile and shrug my shoulders. In point of fact that was neither the first nor the last time that I have fainted. Doctors tell me that it is owing to an irritability of the solar plexus which pressed my diaphragm against my heart.

Since then, however, Indians come to see me now and then as the man who by the special grace of the

Maharshi was rapt in the infinite, as his neighbours went to see Herman Melville as the man who had lived among cannibals. I explain to them that this bad habit of mine is merely a physical idiosyncrasy of no consequence, except that it is a nuisance to other people; but they shake their head incredulously. How do I know, they ask me, that I was not rapt in the infinite? To that I do not know the answer, and the only thing I can say, but refrain from saying for fear it will offend them, is that if it was, the infinite is an absolute blank. The idea of theirs is not so bizarre as at first glance it seems when one remembers their belief that in deep, dreamless sleep consciousness remains and the soul is then united with the infinite reality which is Brahman

The interest aroused by this incident, unimportant to me, but significant to Maharshi's devotees, has caused them to send me a mass of material concerned with him, lives, accounts of his daily activities, conversation with him, answers to the questions put to him, expositions of his teachings and what not. I have read a great deal of it. From it I have formed a vivid impression of the extraordinary man he was..(1)

Major Chadwick has written about this visit on pages 37-40 of his memoir *A Sadhu's Reminiscences*. His account of Maugham's brief *darshan* is substantially the same. However, he criticised Maugham for inventing a trip to the old hall that never took place:

After [giving *darshan* to Maugham in my room] Bhagavan returned to the hall [while] the rest of the party remained in my room for tea. After tea, Somerset Maugham, who was wearing a large pair of boots, wanted to go to the hall and see where Bhagavan usually lived. I took him to the western window through which he looked for some time with interest, making mental notes. He says in his indifferent and quite uninspired article *The Saint*, published in a series of essays twenty years after the event, that he sat in the hall in Bhagavan's presence, but this is untrue, because he could not enter with his boots; he only gazed into the hall from outside. He has also tacked a certain amount of philosophy onto Bhagavan which Bhagavan would never have uttered in his life. But such is the habit of famous authors, to put their own opinions in the mouths of others.

In his recent articles Somerset Maugham says that because of his fainting fit, which some Indians regarded as a high state of *samadhi*, which he denies, he has been sent a mass of literature concerning Maharshi. This may be true, but it is certainly true that he wrote to the ashram and told them that he was going to write about Bhagavan and asked for as much material as they could send. He pointed out at the time that, of course, if he wrote anything it would be a wonderful advertisement for the ashram and the Maharshi. As if it were needed!

There is one other brief account of Maugham's visit in *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 550. That version concludes by saying: "The author [Maugham] attempted to ask questions but did not speak. Major Chadwick encouraged him to ask. Sri Bhagavan

said, 'All finished. Heart talk is all talk. All talk must end in silence only.'

This account was written by Annamalai Swami on the day that the *darshan* took place. When I spoke to Annamalai Swami recently about this meeting he told me that he, Bhagavan, Chadwick and Maugham were sitting in silence for about half an hour in the room. He also told me that Bhagavan's remarks were uttered in English, rather than Tamil, because there was no interpreter there at the time.

Maugham left India about two months later and returned to his home in the South of France. In 1940, after Germany invaded and conquered France, he went to America and lived there for the remainder of the war. He settled in South Carolina where he completed the writing of *The Razor's Edge*, the novel in which the fictional Bhagavan appeared.

The hero of the book, Larry Darrel, is a young American drifter who wanders around the world in an attempt to find peace of mind and answers to some of the fundamental questions that have traditionally perplexed spiritual seekers. He comes to India and finds what he is looking for in a South Indian ashram that is presided over by a Guru who is clearly Bhagavan masquerading under a different name. After staying several years at the ashram, a contented Larry Darrel returns to America at the end of the book with the aim of living, so far as it is possible in the West, the life of a *sadhu*.

There has been considerable speculation among Maugham scholars as to whether the life and character of Darrel is derived from a real-life devotee of Bhagavan. The question appeared to be settled a few months ago when Wilmon Menard, an American author who has written a play based on Maugham's life, wrote an article that was published in the May-June [1988] issue of *Namaskar*, the in-flight magazine of Air India. Menard stated in the article that he had spoken at length to Maugham about the writing of *The Razor's Edge*. In an interview that he gave in the South of France, Maugham apparently told him that he had met an American devotee called Guy Hague at [Sri Ramanasramam](#) and had immediately decided to use him as a model for the main character in his next book. A friend of mine sent a copy of this article to a Mr Dennis Wills, an American researcher who had previously written to Sri Ramanashram asking for information about Hague's stay there and Maugham's brief visit to Bhagavan. I also wrote to Mr Wills since I had collected a few facts about Maugham and Hague that I thought would be of interest to him.

In his reply Dennis Wills told me that he had spoken to Wilmon Menard about his article. Wills wrote: 'any conversations between Maugham and Hague in this article are completely non-existent. Wilmon told me that the text used was from his play on Maugham, a work of fiction; but this is not the impression given in the article.'

In a subsequent letter he told me, 'I have suggested to Wilmon that if he receives any letters in response to his article he should indicate that his publication was based on a play he has written and that this was a work of fiction.'

Dennis Wills has been researching the lives of Maugham and Hague for many years. Although he clearly believes that Menard's dialogues between Bhagavan and Maugham and those between Maugham and Hague are fictitious, there are still a few compelling



With Guy Hague
in Palakottu
(Click on image to enlarge)

reasons for supposing that Hague was the person who had inspired the character of Larry Darrel.

Hague was an American mining engineer who travelled widely in many parts of the world before coming to [Sri Ramanasramam](#) in 1938 for a stay of 2 years; the fictional Darrel was an American who had travelled round Europe doing odd jobs, one of which was in a Belgian mine, before coming to India in the 1930s to spend several years at a South Indian ashram.

The similarities are striking but there is no evidence that Maugham met Hague either in India or anywhere else. Hague was not at Sri Ramanashram, or even in India, on the day that Maugham visited Bhagavan, and Dennis Wills informs me that despite intensive research he has been unable to come up with any evidence that Maugham met Hague in the years prior to the publication of *The Razor's Edge*.

A few people have told me that Christopher Isherwood, the famous English novelist, was the model for Larry Darrel. Although he was neither an American nor a miner, he was a keen student of Vedanta who spent many years in California studying Indian philosophy with Swami Prabhavananda. When I mentioned this theory to Dennis Wills he told me that he had also heard the story and that he had taken the trouble to talk to Isherwood himself about it. Isherwood informed him that he had never visited Bhagavan, nor had he ever spoken to Maugham about Bhagavan's life and teachings. This testimony seems to eliminate him as a possible candidate. A few years ago I was shown a letter written by Paul Brunton's son in which Paul Brunton was put forward as the model, although, as with Isherwood, there is little or nothing to support this claim.

The current consensus among Maugham scholars is that Darrel is a composite character derived partly from different people Maugham had met and partly from Maugham's imagination. Maugham had been inventing characters who dropped out of the mainstream of life to pursue spiritual or artistic quests long before he began work on *The Razor's Edge*. Most scholars now feel that Darrel is yet another fictional embodiment of a theme that fascinated Maugham throughout his life.

In his preamble to *The Razor's Edge* Maugham makes the following statement: 'To save embarrassment to people still living I have given to the persons who play a part in this story names of my own contriving, and I have in other ways taken pains to make sure that no one should recognise them.' Bhagavan was still alive when *The Razor's Edge* was first published. 'To save embarrassment' he was renamed Shri Ganesha, and Sri Ramanashram was located on a lagoon near Trivandrum in Kerala, hundreds of miles away from Tiruvannamalai. Despite these disguises, and a few other minor distortions of facts, both Bhagavan and the ashram are clearly recognisable in many passages in the novel. The following extracts are all taken from the 1944 edition published by William Heinemann.

[Larry Darrel speaking] 'It was three or four miles from the nearest town, but people used to come from there, and even from much further, on foot or by bullock car, to hear the Yogi talk when he was inclined to or just sit at this feet and share with one another the peace and blessedness that were radiated from his presence as

fragrance was wafted upon the air by a tuberose. (2)

[Darrel in conversation with Maugham, the narrator]

'What was your Yogi like?'

'In person d'you mean? Well, he wasn't tall, neither thin nor fat, palish brown in colour and clean shaven, with close-cropped white hair. He never wore anything but a loincloth and yet he managed to look as trim and well-dressed as a young man in one of our Brooks Brothers' advertisements.'

'And what had he got that particularly attracted you?' Larry looked at me for a full minute before answering. His eyes in their deep sockets seemed as though they were trying to see to the depths of my soul.

'Saintliness.'

I was slightly disconcerted by his reply. In that room [in Paris], with its fine furniture, and with those lovely drawings on the walls, the world fell like a plop of water that has seeped through the ceiling from an overflowing bath.

'We've read all about the saints, St Francis, St John of the Cross, but that was hundreds of years ago. I never thought it possible to meet one who was alive now. From the first time I saw him I never doubted that he was a saint. It was a wonderful experience.'

'And what did you gain from it?'

'Peace.' He said casually with a light smile.' (3)

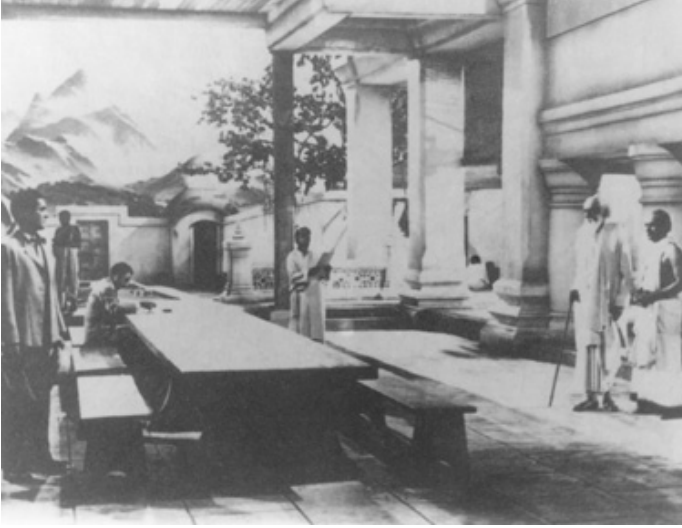
[Darrel speaking again] 'Everyone knew of him. For many years he'd lived in a cave in the hills, but finally he'd been persuaded to move down to the plain where some charitable person had given him a plot of land and had built a little adobe house for him. It was a long way from Trivandrum, the capital, and it took me all day, first by train and then by bullock cart to get to the ashram. I found a young man at the entrance of the compound and asked if I could see the Yogi. I'd bought with me the basket of fruit which is the customary gift to offer. In a few minutes the man came back and led me into a long hall with windows all around it. In one corner Shri Ganesha sat in an attitude of meditation on a raised dais covered with a tiger skin, 'I've been expecting you,' he said. I was surprised but supposed that my friend of Madura had told him something about me. But he shook his head when I mentioned his name. I presented my fruit and he told the young man to take it away. We were left alone and he looked at me without speaking. I don't know how long the silence lasted. It might have been for half an hour. I've told you what he looked like; what I haven't told you is the serenity that he irradiated, the goodness, the peace, the selflessness. I was hot and tired after my journey, but gradually I began to feel wonderfully rested. Before he'd said another word I knew that this was the man I'd been seeking. (4)

[Darrel speaking]: 'I was given as a dwelling place the shack in which Shri Ganesha had lived in when he first came down to the plain. The hall in which he now passed both night and day had been built when disciples

gathered around him and more and more people, attracted by his fame, came to visit him. I read a great deal. I meditated. I listened to Shri Ganesha when he chose to talk; he didn't talk very much, but he was always willing to answer questions and it was wonderfully inspiring to listen to him. It was like music in your ears. Though in his youth he had himself practised very severe austerities he did not enjoin them on his disciples. He sought to wean them from the slavery of selfhood, passion and sense, and told them that they could acquire liberation by tranquillity, restraint, renunciation, resignation, by steadfastness of mind and by an ardent desire for freedom. People used to come from the nearby town three or four miles away, where there was a famous temple to which great crowds flocked once a year for a festival. They came from Trivandrum and from far off places to tell him their troubles, to ask his advice, to listen to his teaching; and all went away strengthened in soul and at peace with themselves. What he taught was very simple. He taught that we are all greater than we know and that wisdom is the means to freedom. He taught that it is not essential to salvation to retire from the world, but only to renounce the self. He taught that work done with no selfish interest purifies the mind and that duties are the opportunities offered to man to sink his separate self and become one with the universal self. But it wasn't his teaching that was so remarkable; it was the man himself, his benignity, his greatness of soul, his saintliness. His presence was a benediction. I was very happy with him. I felt that at last I had found what I wanted. (5)

When *The Razor's Edge* was published it immediately became a best-seller. Wilmon Menard says that 1 million copies were sold but I have read other reports that put the figure as high as three million. Whatever the figure, there is general agreement that it was Maugham's most successful novel. Shortly after it was published, he sold the film rights to Twentieth Century Fox for \$250,000. Darryl Zanuck, the head of Twentieth Century Fox, asked Maugham to work on the screenplay, and Maugham agreed. Maugham wanted to work for nothing, but Zanuck insisted on paying him with a Matisse painting. It was an expensive present because when the film was finally made not a single word of Maugham's dialogue was used.

Although Maugham's screenplay was not used by Zanuck, the film was a critical and financial success. It was nominated for four Oscars and it made so much money that Zanuck asked Maugham to write a sequel to *The Razor's Edge* so that he could film it. Maugham, understandably disenchanted with Hollywood after his script was thrown away, declined the offer. He never worked in Hollywood again and never wrote a sequel.



Hollywood's idea of what Ramanasramam looked like. The still is taken from the film of The Razor's Edge. 'Bhagavan' is featured on the right with a walking stick.

Someone who read this article has drawn my attention to a site that has more material on the debate surrounding the real-life identity of Larry Durrel.

See

http://www.geocities.com/the_wanderling/razors_edge_ring.html
for more details.

(1) *The Saint*, pp. 2-5, published by Heinemann, 1958.

(2) pp. 137-8.

(3) pp. 139.

(4) pp. 256-7.

(5) pp. 246-7.

The Evolution of the Mother's Temple

(First published in *The Mountain Path*, 2000, pp. 179-87.)

[Click here for a Tamil translation of this article \(PDF\)](#)

Sri Bhagavan's mother attained Self-realisation in her dying moments on the evening of 19th May, 1922. The devotees, after some deliberations, decided that her body should be buried, rather than cremated, since that was the accepted procedure for women saints. They realised that it would be necessary to select a burial site at the foot of the hill, rather than on the hill itself, since the Arunachaleswara Temple authorities, who administered the part of the hill on which Skandashram had been built, would not allow any bodies to be buried on the mountain itself. Their logic was that since the mountain itself was a Siva *lingam*, it would be an act of desecration to inter a dead body on it. There was another temple rule, which was also strictly enforced, that forbade the worship of any images on the hill. This meant that even if the devotees had secretly buried the body on the hill, they would not have been permitted to raise a shrine over it and perform ritual worship there. In the 1930s Bhagavan revealed, in a deposition about the ownership of Arunachala, that the temple authorities had reminded him of one of these rules shortly after his mother had died:

On the hill there was one Saraswati Swami. That swami advertised that he wanted to perform ritual worship before an image of Lord Subramanian on the hill. The temple authorities objected and stopped it. In an official notice they said that the hill itself is *Linga swarupa*, and that to do ritual worship of another image on it, and to celebrate festivals there, is against the tradition of the *sastras*. On another occasion, when my mother attained *samadhi*, they raised a precautionary objection that her *samadhi* should not be on the hill; they feared that we might build her *samadhi* on the hill itself. On this occasion also their objection was that the hill is *Iswara swarupa*.

Bhagavan concurred with this attitude by saying, a little later in his deposition, 'There is an ancient tradition that this hill is *Linga swarupa*; that is to say, this hill itself is God. This tradition is not to be found anywhere else. That is the cause of the glory of this place.'

Because of these rules and traditions it was decided, on the evening the Mother died, that her body should be buried at the foot of the hill on the southern side of Arunachala. This location was selected because it was a traditional site for the burial of *sadhus*. It seems that Bhagavan initially wanted the body to be buried secretly and without ostentatious ceremonies. In later years he told T. P. Ramachandra Iyer that he had instructed the devotees to 'take the body in the dark without making any noise and without anyone knowing about it. Make a pit in no-man's land. Bury it quickly and come back before dawn.'

Since it would have been extremely difficult to carry the body down the hill in the middle of the night, the plan was never carried out. Instead, the devotees sat around the body until about 4 a.m., chanting verses from the *Tiruvachakam*. The burial party eventually left with the body just before dawn, at about 5 a.m.

The site that was initially selected for the *samadhi* was rather



Bhagavan with his mother at Skandashram
(Click on image to enlarge)



The Mother's Temple and Arunachala
(Click on image to enlarge)



The Mother's Temple viewed across Pali Tirtham.
(Click on image to enlarge)

close to the road. Sri Ramakrishna Iyer, a devotee who was also the village munsif, suggested that it be relocated nearer the hill. He pointed out that if the burial site was well away from the road, it would be very convenient to construct a temple over it in later years. His suggestion was accepted and a large *samadhi* pit was dug according to the rules in the *Tirumantiram* that had been laid down for the burial of *jnanis*.

I asked Kunju Swami, who was present at Skandashram when the Mother died, why no one had attempted to carry out Bhagavan's original instructions. He replied:

It wasn't possible to get some of the things done in the middle of the night. Mother died late in the evening. Afterwards, there was a lot of work to do and many things to arrange. We needed to get the permission of the village munsif and also the permission of the Bavaji Math, which owned the land on which the *samadhi* pit was dug. These people were not available in the middle of the night. I didn't get the feeling that Bhagavan was serious about the hasty burial because he kept most of us at Skandashram and initiated a chanting of the *Tiruvachakam* that lasted almost the whole night. Mother's body did not leave Skandashram until shortly before dawn.

We wanted to do it properly. There is a tradition that if you bury a *jnani's* body in ordinary earth, that will be bad for any nearby town. It is equally bad if you burn it. In the Mother's case a special deep pit was made, lined with stones. In Tirumular's *Tirumantiram* it says that a *jnani's* body must be buried in a pit lined with stones. We followed this rule, but I don't think that we followed all the other traditional rules because we were not aware of some of them at the time.

While the *samadhi* pit was being dug, the Mother's body was seated under a big peepul tree on the bank of the Pali Tirtham. So many devotees came from town to pay their last respects that a large area of cactus and shrub had to be cleared to accommodate them. After *abhishekam* had been done to the body, it was taken to the place of burial. Kunju Swami has described what happened next:

Sacred ash and sacred grasses were put inside the *samadhi* and the Mother's body was lowered into it. Sri Bhagavan and others each put in a handful of *vibhuti* and camphor. It was then covered with a stone slab on the top of which was placed a Siva *lingam*. The lingam was then worshipped in the traditional manner. At twelve noon all of us left for Palakottu. Bhagavan walked very slowly while the *nadaswaram* played on his instrument with great enthusiasm. The distance from the *samadhi* to Palakottu is not much more than a hundred yards, but it took the procession an hour to cover the distance. It was a beautiful scene as the musician played on his instrument with great gusto, looking to Bhagavan who was setting the slow pace at the head of the procession and slightly swaying in time to the rhythm on the music.

(1)

From that day on, *puja* was performed daily at the shrine. On

the tenth day after the Mother's liberation a special *puja* was done, about a thousand people were fed, and the *moksha deepam*, the light of liberation, was lit at the shrine. Thereafter, Bhagavan's brother, Chinnaswami, undertook the job of maintaining the *samadhi* and doing daily *puja* there.

Bhagavan continued to live at Skandashram but Chinnaswami and Dandapani Swami decided that they would live full-time near the Mother's *samadhi*. They erected a coconut-leaf hut over the shrine and built another hut nearby that they used as a kitchen. Rice, dhal and other provisions were brought down daily from Skandashram. These were converted into meals for the *sadhus* and into food offerings for the daily *puja*. Sometimes, when no food was available, Chinnaswami had to go begging in town to acquire the provisions for the daily *puja*.

At this stage of the ashram's development, food was often in short supply. The items of food that devotees contributed were stored in Vasudeva Sastry's house in Tiruvannamalai. Each day he would send enough provisions to Skandashram for a meal to be cooked there. As some of these provisions were taken to the Mother's *samadhi*, the *sadhus* who lived at Skandashram occasionally did not have enough food to eat. Vasudeva Sastry felt that there were insufficient resources to maintain two establishments, one at Skandashram and the other at the Mother's *samadhi*. Since some of the other devotees felt the same way, he sent a note to Ramanatha Brahmachari, who was living at Skandashram, which read, 'Devotees give not to Vasudeva but to Vaasudeva'. Since Vasudeva was the parent of Vaasudeva, the note implied that the devotees wanted their donations to go to Bhagavan and not to the institution that was beginning to grow up around the Mother's *samadhi*.

When Ramanatha Brahmachari showed the note to Bhagavan, Bhagavan expressed his approval of the activities that were going on at the Mother's *samadhi* by saying, 'How could there be Vaasudeva without Vasudeva?'

When this remark was conveyed to Vasudeva Sastry, he abandoned his opposition to the diversion of food.

Shortly afterwards, Bhagavan left Skandashram for good and went to live in the hut that had been built over the Mother's *samadhi*. In later years he would say that it had been the 'divine will' that had prompted him to move down the hill and take up residence in his mother's shrine.

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it was the divine will that prevented him from leaving the shrine to go back to Skandashram, for he once told Devaraja Mudaliar, 'After Mother's death I used to come down now and then to the *samadhi* and return to Skandashram. One day, about six months after Mother's death, I went there on one such visit and after sitting there for some time, wanted to get up and go back. However, something told me that I should not go back but stay on there. It was as if my legs refused to get up. And I stayed on. That is how the *asramam* began. Who knew then that all this would grow up?'(2)

Bhagavan added further sanctity to the Mother's *samadhi* by living in the small building that had been erected over it for a period of 5 years. He only moved out of it in 1928 when the devotees constructed the old hall on an adjacent piece of land.

In the mid-1920s Bhagavan himself decided that a more

substantial building was needed to house the Mother's *samadhi*. He decided to utilise some badly baked bricks that had been abandoned by some brick makers who had set up a temporary kiln near the ashram. Some devotees in town were called in to help move the bricks. One night they formed a human chain, with Bhagavan as one of the links, and transferred all the bricks one by one to the ashram. The following day a mud-and-brick wall was constructed around the *samadhi*. Bhagavan himself did all the work on the inside of the wall while a professional mason worked on the outside. The 'temple' was completed by erecting a thatched roof on top of the wall. This construction, the forerunner of the temple that now stands on the same site, remained unchanged for more than ten years.

In the 1930s Sri Ramanashram began to develop and expand. The cowshed, the dining room and the kitchen, the storeroom, the *patasala*, the old office and the bookstore were all built in a burst of activity between 1929 and 1938. At the end of this period the only remaining large, uncompleted project was a plan to build a proper stone temple over the Mother's *samadhi*. Since the construction of such a temple would be enormously expensive, many devotees were opposed to the plan on the grounds that it would be a white elephant that the ashram could ill afford. At Bhagavan's sixtieth birthday celebrations, which took place in January 1939, there was a long debate between those devotees who wanted a big temple and those who thought that the ashram's funds would be better invested in building more accommodation for visitors. The anti-temple group also wanted to acquire large tracts of land on which the ashram's food could be grown. Bhagavan remained aloof from the debate and no one at that time really knew what his own views on the subject were.

Although Bhagavan delegated most day-to-day management decisions to Chinna Swami, the ashram manager, he exercised a strict control over all the ashram's building projects. It was Bhagavan alone who decided when buildings should be constructed, where they should be built, on what scale they should be constructed, and even who should be put in charge of building them. He personally drew up the plans for many of the large buildings that now exist in the ashram, and he refused even to look at alternative plans and blueprints that had been drawn up by professional engineers and architects. It was clear, therefore, that no action could be taken until Bhagavan himself gave the word.

Throughout the 1930s Annamalai Swami had been supervising all the major building projects in the ashram. Each day he would receive his instructions directly from Bhagavan, and each evening he would go back to Bhagavan to tell him how much had been completed and how much still remained to be done. Chinna Swami therefore decided that Annamalai Swami was the best person to find out what Bhagavan's intentions really were.

He approached him and said, 'Bhagavan always tells his buildings plans directly to you. Please ask him what we should do about the Mother's Temple. Ask him whether we should build it simply or on a large scale.'

When Annamalai Swami conveyed the query to Bhagavan, Bhagavan finally disclosed his decision: 'If it is constructed well, and on a large scale, I shall be happy.'

Chinna Swami, who had been in doubt about Bhagavan's

intentions, was delighted because he had been wanting to build a big temple over his mother's *samadhi* for many years. He immediately began to make preparations for the construction.

Since it was not ordinary building work, a qualified outsider had to be brought in. After careful consideration, the whole project was entrusted to Vaidyantha Sthapati, an expert in temple architecture and engineering. He brought with him many accomplished stone-masons who had had a lot of experience in temple construction.

When the project started, the ashram only had enough money to pay for a small portion of the work. Bhagavan knew that funds were in short supply but he made it clear that he wanted the temple to be financed out of unsolicited donations. He repeatedly told Chinnaswami and all the other devotees that they should never ask for funds on the ashram's behalf. Chinnaswami, however, felt that the temple could not be built without an aggressive fund-raising drive, so he went against Bhagavan's wishes and made several attempts to raise money. One typical effort, which was followed by a typical Bhagavan response, was described by T. P. Ramachandra Iyer in *Bhagavan Smrtulu*:

There was once a shortage of funds while the temple was being built. Money was needed immediately. At that time a man called Chaganlal Yogi came from Bombay for the first time. On seeing him Chinnaswami suggested to me: 'We need Rs 50,000 for the temple. So why don't the three of us go to Jamnalal Bajaj for the money and bring it? Introduce Chaganlal Yogi to me so that we can start.'

Chaganlal Yogi felt that the proposal was unacceptable. But because he was a newcomer and was feeling rather shy, he felt that he had no alternative but to accept. Chinnaswami made all the arrangements for his luggage but before we could depart we had first to cross the hurdle of telling Bhagavan about our mission. Chinnaswami never came before Bhagavan to speak; he always used to send a messenger if information had to be passed on to Bhagavan. On this occasion he selected me and asked me to tell Bhagavan about our journey.

'How can I tell Bhagavan such a thing?' I asked. 'You come with me.'

Chinnaswami did not even have the courage for that so we had to collect some other people. We all went to Bhagavan while he was having a rest alone in the afternoon. We stood before him for some time but he didn't even look at us. His gaze was fixed elsewhere.

Each of us wanted one of the others to speak. Finally, Mouniswami told him what we wanted. For a long time Bhagavan made no response, but eventually he spoke: 'I have told you not to beg in my name. Now I am telling you again. Be satisfied with what you have. What is to happen will happen.'

'If you now go and ask for money, will not the donors ask you whether you have my agreement or not, and whether I gave you permission for this? What do you intend to tell them if they ask questions like this?'

Chaganlal Yogi had got the excuse he was looking for. He told Bhagavan, 'Unless we tell them that you

consented to this, none of them will given even a paisa.'

What more could they do? They slipped out one by one, and Chinnaswami's journey was cancelled.

After this incident Bhagavan remarked, 'Did the construction of all these buildings occur because of my begging? It all happened in the way it was destined to happen. Nothing happens purely as a result of anyone's own efforts.'

Bhagavan's attitude to the construction work, and to the financing of it, is also brought out in the following stories which were narrated to me by Annamalai Swami:

Because all the stone masons who were working on the temple were paid on a daily basis, I was asked to supervise some of them to ensure that the ashram got value for money. Although I knew nothing about temple construction, I had had enough experience of supervising workers to see that the stone-masons were deliberately working very slowly. Since they were classified as skilled workers, they were getting a very high daily wage for doing very little. It seemed to me that they were deliberately taking about three days to do one day's work. I told them that they were cheating the ashram, and I tried to persuade them to work more honestly, but they refused to change their ways.

One of them told me, 'All you people are eating and sleeping here for nothing. Why are you troubling us about work? It is no loss to you if we work slowly.'

After a few unsuccessful attempts to get them to work, I reported the matter to Bhagavan.

I told him, 'The temple workers are working very slowly. In the evening Chinnaswami pays them whatever I have written on the wages list. I don't like to waste the ashram's money on dishonest workers, but I have no authority to dismiss them. If I write each day that they must be paid for work that they have not done, am I not also cheating the ashram?'

Bhagavan replied, 'Don't worry about this matter. If they cheat like this and get money that they have not earned out of the ashram, this money will not stay with them. Ultimately they will find that their only possessions are their hammers and chisels. The wages that they have received dishonestly will go to waste. They cannot cheat Bhagavan, they can only cheat themselves.'

Then, after pausing for a while, he added, 'We should not worry about the financial aspect of the work because God will supply all the money that we need.'

As usual, Bhagavan's faith was justified. The temple put a severe strain on the ashram's finances but we always managed to keep the work going. On some days the ashram had to depend on donations received during the day to pay the wages in the evening. At the start of the day we would hire workers, even though we knew that we had no money to pay them. During the day donations would arrive in various ways and by evening there would always be enough to pay the workers.'



The gopuram over the Mother's Temple showing Dakshinamurti teaching the four sons of Brahma

Bhagavan made daily visits to the temple to watch the progress of the construction and to inspect the quality of the workmanship. If any of the work was not up to standard, he would call attention to it and request that the necessary improvements be made. On one visit, for example, he pointed out that there was too much space between the flagstones around the *garbhagraha* (the inner shrine), and on another occasion he requested that some cracks in the wall be properly pointed with cement. Bhagavan occasionally initiated jobs himself. For example, when the walls of the *garbhagraha* had been completed, Bhagavan decided that the name of the temple should be inscribed on the front wall. Annamalai Swami, who was asked to help with this work, told me how it was done:

If one looks over the entrance to the *garbhagraha* one can see two elephants carved out of stone. Under their feet is a carved stone scroll. The full name of the temple, '*Mathrubuteswaralayam*', meaning 'the temple of God in the form of the Mother', is carved in stone on this scroll. Bhagavan himself wrote out this name for me in big Sankshrit letters. His idea was that I should make a stencil and then paint the letters on the scroll. Later, one of the *sthapatis* would carve out the name by chiselling out the area covered by the painted letters.

I sat in Bhagavan's presence in the hall, carefully cutting out the name. I kept all my attention on the work because I knew that I would not be able to get away with even the smallest of mistakes. Bhagavan was watching me all the time I was working. At about 3 p.m. Bhagavan used to go out of the hall to urinate. At that time, on that day, he stood up and started to move towards the door. Everyone in the hall, except for me, stood up. I was in the middle of cutting out a letter; but I didn't want to risk spoiling it by taking my scissors away from the paper.

I heard a man muttering behind me, 'Bhagavan has stood up but this man has no respect. He is still sitting on the floor. He hasn't even stopped working.'

Bhagavan must have also heard this man because he seemed to change his mind about going outside. Instead, he came and sat next to me on the floor. He put his hand on my shoulder and watched intently as I finished cutting out that letter. Then, without bothering to take his expected trip outside, he got up and sat on his couch again. After that there were no more complaints about my disrespect.

When the cutting was over, I painted the letters on the scroll under the elephants' feet. As I was working there, the chief *sthapati* tried to stop me.

He called up to me: 'Stop doing that! I am the only man who is competent to write letters like that. How can you do these things properly?'

Bhagavan came to my rescue again. He had been standing nearby, watching me paint the letters. He silenced the *sthapati* by saying, 'He did not do it on his own authority. I myself told him to do it.'

The construction of the temple, which was concluded at the beginning of 1949, took approximately ten years. When it was

(Click on image to
enlarge)



*The inner shrine
of the Mother's
Temple*

(Click on image to
enlarge)



finished the temple complex included a large stone hall that was originally intended to replace the old hall that Bhagavan had lived in since 1928. A large stone sofa was installed there for him to sit on, but when it came time to make the move, Bhagavan clearly indicated that he didn't want to either sit or live there. When he was first shown where his new sofa would be located, he complained that if he sat there, the monkeys and squirrels would not longer have access to him. And later, when a sculptor was carving a stone statue of him, he deflected a request that he move into the new hall by saying, 'Why don't you get the stone Swami to sit on the stone sofa?' He was finally persuaded to sit in the new hall, but even after the move he still continued to complain. After some time in his new residence he noticed a group of villagers trying to summon up courage to come in and see him. On that occasion he protested that the hall had been built on such a grandiose scale, poor people who wanted *darshan* would be too intimidated by the size and grandeur of the building to enter it. Bhagavan eventually stayed in the new hall for about six months. The remaining few months of his life were spent in the *mahanirvana* room.

Although the main purpose of the Mother's Temple and the adjoining new hall was to provide an appropriate structure over the *samadhi* of the Mother, ChinnaSwami had long nurtured an idea that Bhagavan's *samadhi* could also be incorporated into it. It seems that he had a plan to inter Bhagavan's body in a shrine that would be slightly to the north of the new hall. ChinnaSwami had planned to make a large doorway in the northern wall that would connect the new hall with this shrine. In his reminiscences (3) K. K. Nambiar related the story of how ChinnaSwami asked him to build a portion of the northern veranda of the new hall in such a way that it could be easily dismantled and replaced by an additional *samadhi* shrine. ChinnaSwami tried to get Bhagavan's approval for this scheme. He sent a plan to Bhagavan that gave details of a large doorway in the northern wall of the new hall, but Bhagavan rejected it and sent back a reply that the wall should remain as it was. It would seem from these incidents that although Bhagavan fully supported the construction of the Mother's Temple, he had no inclination either to live or be buried in any part of it.

The *kumbhabhishekam* ceremony for the Mother's Temple, which was performed in March 1949, was a fitting climax to the years of effort that had been expended in its construction. The ceremonies, which lasted for four days, were attended by tens of thousands of people from all over India. On the final day alone, over 15,000 people were fed in the ashram. So many visitors came that extra trains were laid on from Madras and Madurai. For four days a shuttle service of buses ferried visitors to and from the train station, and the local Post Office had to be temporarily upgraded and expanded for a week to handle all the extra business. Two hundred priests, under the supervision of the Sankaracharya of Puri, carried out the rituals, while Bhagavan himself empowered the Sri Chakra that was to be worshipped in the main shrine. The temple had come a long way from the coconut-leaf hut of 1922.

Bhagavan himself summed up the rapid development of both the temple and the ashram when he remarked to T. P. Ramachandra Iyer, 'I suggested that the body be buried silently before dawn. But things happened the way they had to happen. See how many constructions have now come up on the site where a body was

The entrance to the New Hall where Sri Ramana briefly stayed in 1949
(Click on image to enlarge)



Bhagavan initiating the kumbhabhishekam rituals at the inauguration of the Mother's Temple in 1949
(Click on image to enlarge)



Pali Tirtham, the Mother's Temple and Arunachala viewed from the Tiruvannamalai-Bangalore road
(Click on image to enlarge)

silently buried!'

(1) *The Mountain Path*, 1981, p. 188.

(2) *My Recollections* pp. 134-5.

(3) *The Guiding Presence of Sri Ramana* pp. 63-4.

I am - The First Name of God

(First published in *The Mountain Path*, 1992, pp. 26-35 and pp. 126-42.)
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In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* there is a verse that describes how, at the beginning of the universe, the Self became aware of itself as 'I':

In the beginning this [universe] was the Self alone. He [the Self] reflected and saw nothing but the Self. He first said, 'I am He'. Therefore He came to be known by the name *aham* ['I'].⁽¹⁾

'I' thus became the first name of God. Bhagavan corroborated the sentiments expressed in this verse when he told a devotee, 'The one, infinite, unbroken whole [*plenum*] became aware of itself as "I". This is its original name. All other names, for example *Om*, are later growths.'⁽²⁾

On another occasion Bhagavan, commenting on this famous verse from the *Upanishads*, explained how, due to a felicitous combination of letters, the name *aham* not only denoted the subjective nature of God but also implied that it encompassed and constituted all of the manifest universe:

The talk then turned to the name of God and Bhagavan said, 'Talking of all mantras, the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* says '*aham*' [I] is the first name of God. The first letter in Sanskrit is 'A' and the last letter 'Ha' and 'aha' thus includes everything from beginning to end. The word *ayam* means 'that which exists', Self-shining and Self-evident. *Ayam*, *atma* and *aham* all refer to the same thing.'⁽³⁾

The name *aham* merely indicates that God experiences himself subjectively as 'I'. When one adds the word 'am' to the name there is the further implication that God is, that God is being itself. Bhagavan expounded on this idea in *Guru Vachaka Kovai* and then went on to say that 'I am' is not merely the first name of God, it is also the most appropriate:

Since along with 'I', the aforementioned first name [mentioned in the previous verse], 'am' always shines as the light of reality, 'I am' is also the name. Among the many thousands of names of God, no name suits God, who abides in the Heart, devoid of thought, so aptly as 'I' or 'I am'. Of all the known names of God, 'I', 'I' alone will resound triumphantly when the ego is destroyed, rising as the silent supreme word [*mauna para vak*] in the Heart-space of those whose attention is Selfward-facing.'⁽⁴⁾

The word 'Heart', which appears twice in this passage, was often used by Bhagavan as a synonym for the Self. In Tamil the identity between the terms 'Heart' and 'I am' is clearly evident since the single word *ullam* can mean either 'am' or 'the Heart'. In *Arunachala Pancharatnam*, for example, Bhagavan wrote, 'Since you shine as "I" in the Heart, your name itself is Heart'. This can be expanded to mean, 'Since you shine as "I" in the "I am", which is the Heart, your name itself [I am] is the Heart'.

Bhagavan often cited the Bible, and in particular the statement 'I am that I am', to support his contention that God's real nature was 'I

am'. Since this quotation and other similar biblical texts are regarded as a divine revelation of truth by both the Jewish and Christian religions, I intend in this article to examine them in some detail in order to point out what the Jewish and Christian religions made of these statements and to show how their interpretations differed from those put forward by Bhagavan.

The following extract from *Talks* is a good place to start:

'I am' is the name of God. Of all the definitions of God, none is so well put as the biblical statement 'I am that I am' in Exodus chapter three. There are other statements such as *brahmavaiham* [*Brahman* am I], *aham brahmasmi* [I am *Brahman*] and *soham* [I am He]. But none is so direct as Jehovah [which means] 'I am'.⁽⁵⁾

The biblical quote comes from an Old Testament story that tells of an encounter between God and Moses. God, manifesting Himself as a voice, introduces Himself by saying, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob' (Exodus 3:6).⁽⁶⁾ God appointed Moses to represent the Israelites, who were then living as slaves in Egypt, in the court of the Egyptian Pharaoh. He wanted Moses to plead their case with the Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt, and to lead them out of captivity. Moses asked for more information:

- 3.13 Then Moses said to God: 'If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you," and they ask, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them?
- 3.14 God said to Moses, 'I am that I am'. And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel, "I am has sent me to you".
- 3.15 ' this is my name for ever and ever and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations.'

This revelation of the divine name 'I am' was an immensely significant moment in the history of Judaism, but to understand why, one needs to look closely at the Jewish attitude towards names and the naming of objects.

According to the Jews of the biblical period, to have no name meant to have no existence in reality, for when one's name is taken away from one, one ceases, quite literally, to exist. The giving of a name, therefore, is not merely an act of identification; it actually brings into existence the object named and summarises verbally its inherent properties. In Genesis, the first book of the Bible, God gives reality to His creation by naming its components: He names the day 'day', the night 'night', the sea 'sea', and so on (Genesis 1:3-10). Only by doing so can He bring them into a real and permanent existence. For the same reason He commanded Adam to give a name to each of the animals (Genesis 2:20). As for the name of God Himself, He had been called by several names prior to His famous declaration 'I am that I am': 'El' and 'Elohim', meaning 'God', and 'Shaddai', meaning 'Almighty'. But these names were not revealed by God Himself, they were merely convenient designations attributed to Him by a people who were as yet ignorant of His true name. When God finally revealed His name to be 'I am', He became more of a living reality to the Jews, and more accessible to them. A Roman Catholic biblical scholar explains why:

Israelite thought in the biblical era lacked the discursive

reasoning developed by Greek philosophy and was incapable of general and abstract speculation. In Hebrew 'to know God' is to encounter a personal reality; and a person is not known unless his name is known. To know the name is to know the reality named. Hence, knowledge of God is disclosed in His name.(7)

This intimate relationship between a name and the person who owns it can be clearly seen in many biblical stories, for the names in the Old Testament are not given out accidentally: the name of each character reveals and signifies the essence, the chief personality trait or the most memorable action done by the person so named. If a person in the Old Testament transformed his character or was inspired or motivated by God to begin a new way of life, God Himself sometimes changed the person's name so that the new name accurately reflected the changed situation. Jacob, for example, tricked his blind father into giving him a blessing that should have rightly gone to his brother (Genesis 27:6). The word Jacob literally means 'a cheat'. Later he wrestled with an angel of God and fought so tenaciously, not giving up even after dislocating a hip, that he forced the angel to give him a blessing (Genesis 32:28). The blessing was a change of name and consequently a change of character and essence. No longer would he be called Jacob, meaning 'cheat'. He was transformed into Israel, meaning 'God strove' or 'one who strove with God'. One could cite numerous other examples but two will suffice. When Abram, meaning 'High Father', made his covenant with God, and God then promised him that he would found the Jewish race, He Himself ordered Abram to change his name to Abraham, which means 'Father of a multitude'. Abraham's wife, Sarah, was originally called Sarai, which means 'mockery'. She was the one who had laughed at God when He had promised that she would conceive a son, even though she was ninety years old. When the son arrived and God promised Abraham that among his descendants would be several kings, He ordered Abraham to change his wife's name to Sarah, meaning princess, since she would be the cofounder of this royal line.

Set against this background one can now easily imagine the significance of God revealing for the first time what His real name was. He had been asked before but prior to this moment He had declined to give an answer. In the eyes of the Jews, by declaring Himself to be 'I am' God was not merely giving Himself a convenient designation or title, He was revealing to humanity for the first time His real nature, His real essence and His real identity.

The phrase 'I am that I am', in which God first reveals Himself to be 'I am', is one of the most famous statements in the Bible and it has consequently attracted a lot of critical attention. It is clear that God is making a very important and fundamental statement about Himself, but there has been wide disagreement among biblical scholars about its true significance. Bhagavan put his own interpretation on the phrase, as can be seen from the following quotation, but it is not one which would appeal to many biblical scholars:

The essence of mind is only awareness or consciousness. When the ego, however, dominates it, it functions as the reasoning, thinking or sensing faculty. The cosmic mind, being not limited by the ego, has nothing separate from itself and is therefore only aware. That is what the Bible

means by 'I am that I am'.⁽⁸⁾

The differing opinions among theologians on the meaning and significance of 'I am that I am' have primarily arisen because no one can be really sure what the original Hebrew meant. Everyone agrees that the original phrase '*ehyeh aser ehyeh*' is derived from an archaic Hebrew form of the verb 'to be', but there the agreement ends. One school of thought maintains that since in Hebrew the present and future tenses are identical, *ehyeh* might mean either 'I am' or 'I will be'. One variation of this theory has God say 'I am what I will be', meaning, 'What I am now is what I will always be'. Others have postulated that *ehyeh* is not 'I am' but 'I cause to be'. Thus, instead of saying, 'I am that I am' God is saying, in effect, 'I cause to be whatever comes into being', or something similar. This explanation has found much favour among the Christian theologians who prefer to see God as a creator rather than as pure being.

There is yet another theory which does not depend on grammatical niceties. In the ancient semitic world - we are here talking about more than 3,000 years ago - it was widely believed that anyone who knew a name had power over the being so titled. According to this theory, when Moses asked God for His name, God declined by giving the evasive answer 'I am what I am'. Proponents of this theory maintained that if He had revealed His true name, whatever it might be, it would have given Moses some power or hold over Him, and that would have been unacceptable because it would have diminished His transcendental omnipotence.

In modern times such a theory sounds amusing rather than plausible, but it cannot be denied that in the Old Testament era names were zealously guarded for precisely the reasons given in the preceding paragraph. After Jacob had wrestled with the angel in the story I have already told, he asked the angel for his name, but the angel refused to disclose it, possibly fearing that Jacob might use it to gain some power over him (Genesis 32:29). In another interesting story, Manoah, the father of Samson, asked another angel of God:

'What is your name, for we shall want to know it when your words come true?' The angel of the Lord said to him, 'How can you ask my name? It is a name of wonder.' (Judges 13:16-19)

Those who believe that God was merely being evasive when He said 'I am that I am' are in a minority for most authorities concede that the significance of the name is contained in the meaning of the word *ehyeh*, usually translated as 'I am'.

Though God clearly refers to Himself as 'I am' in Exodus 3:14, and though He specifically stated in the next verse that this was the name by which He wanted to be remembered, this was not the name that the Jews subsequently used. They preferred the name Yahweh, which is the third person singular of the present tense of the same archaic form of the verb 'to be'. So, instead of referring to Him as 'I am', the ancient Jews and the compilers of the Old Testament always called him Yahweh, meaning 'He is' or 'He who is'.⁽⁹⁾ 'I am' was too holy a name for the Jews to use, and even the euphemism 'He who is' was so sacred and holy to them, it was never spoken by ordinary people. Only the high priest of the temple was permitted to say it out loud, and even he was only permitted to utter it once a year on Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish

year.

So how did the Jews get round saying the name of Yahweh when they read the scriptures or spoke of Him? They used two further euphemisms: 'Adonai', meaning 'Lord' or merely 'Shem', which means 'the name'. In the ancient Hebrew script there were no vowels, only consonants, and so Yahweh was written YHWH. Whenever the Jews came across this sacred combination of letters, they ignored the correct pronunciation and instead said 'Adonai' or 'Shem'. This habit eventually caused, inadvertently, the name Jehovah to come into existence. On some manuscripts written about a thousand years ago, when vowel sounds had begun to be added to the consonants, the vowels of the word Adonai were interspersed between the consonants of YHWH to remind readers to say 'Adonai' rather than 'Yahweh'. When these manuscripts were translated into English, the translators, ignorant of this convention coined the word Jehovah, which they thought was a correct rendering of the word. This is still the most common rendering of Yahweh in English, even though it is now known to be incorrect. So far as the Jews are concerned, Jehovah is a meaningless non-word; the real name for them remains Yahweh, 'He who is'.

Most English translations of the Bible have opted for the euphemism rather than the real name itself, even though there is no prohibition in Christianity against pronouncing the divine name as 'Yahweh'. The name YHWH occurs about 6,800 times in the Old Testament and is most commonly rendered in English as LORD, usually printed in capital letters. Thus, for example, when God speaks in the preamble to the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:2), He says, in English, 'I am the LORD your God who brought you out of Egypt'.

Though the divine name Yahweh appears thousands of times in the Bible, there is no evidence that the Jews conceived their God to be immanent being. Theological speculation of any kind was alien to the ancient Jews and there is no indication in the Old Testament that they thought of God as a formless abstraction. Rather, they conceived of Him anthropomorphically, attributing all kinds of human traits to Him. Nor is there any evidence that the Jews of the biblical period thought that the aim of life was to attain union with Him, or partake of His being in any way. YHWH, for the Jews, was a transcendent being who had to be worshipped, placated, served, and above all, obeyed. He was separate from His creation, rather than immanent in it, and so far above and beyond the creatures He had created that, none of them could ever dream of uniting with Him or even approaching Him. For the Jews, 'knowing God' meant having a personal relationship with Him in a totally dualistic way.

The only Jews who used God's revelation of Himself as 'I am' to develop both a theology of God and a spiritual practice through which He might be directly experienced were groups of mystics who followed a tradition known as Kabbala.⁽¹⁰⁾ They evolved intricate cosmologies, deriving them from a mystical exegesis of Old Testament texts, and broke with traditional Judaic thought by proclaiming that man could approach YHWH and in His presence commune with His beingness.

Kabbalistic practices are many and varied, but two are of particular interest if one is looking for points of contact between mystical Judaism and the teachings of Bhagavan. For the Kabbalists, God, the Supreme Being, is *Ehyeh*, 'I am', and one can

approach him directly by invoking the divine name of Yahweh. In the *Book of Zohar*, one of the most important Kabbalistic texts, it is written, 'Blessed is the person who utterly surrenders his soul to the name of YHWH, to dwell therein and establish therein its throne of glory'.⁽¹¹⁾

In one interesting practice, which parallels Hindu *sadhanas*, Kabbalists split the name Yahweh into two components and invoke 'Yah' with the incoming breath and 'weh' with the outgoing breath in an attempt to be continuously mindful of the reality that the name signifies. There is also a Kabbalistic walking meditation in which one invokes 'Yahweh' when the right foot touches the ground and 'Elohim' on the alternating left steps. Yahweh is 'He who is', God as being, whereas Elohim is the biblical name of God the creator. Simultaneously one must retain a continuous awareness of 'Eyheh', the 'I am' from which, in the Kabbalistic tradition, all creation emanates and manifests. Teachers of Kabbala claim that if this practice is properly pursued, one enters into a state of communion with God.

Next: [There is another crucial area in which Bhagavan's teaching differ fundamentally from those of both Judaism and Christianity.](#)

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(1) *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, tr. Swami Nikhilananda: from *The Upanishads*, vol. 3, 1975 ed., p. 113.

(2) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 92. See also talk no. 518 where Bhagavan says, 'The *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* says *Aham nama abhavat* [He became "I" named]. That is the original name of reality.'

(3) *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 22nd November 1945.

(4) *Guru Vachaka Kovai*, vv. 713-5.

(5) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 106. The name Jehovah is derived from the verb 'to be,' but since it is a third person form, it actually means 'He is' rather than 'I am.'

(6) Abraham entered into a covenant with God and by doing so became the founder of the Jewish religion. Isaac and Jacob are, respectively, his son and grandson. All Jews are descended from this lineage.

(7) *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, p. 737. This is generally regarded as being the most authoritative Catholic commentary on the Bible.

(8) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 188.

(9) The *Septuagint*, the earliest Greek translation of the Old Testament, translates Yahweh with a phrase that means 'He who is'. This is widely regarded, among those who think *ehyeh* denotes God-as-being rather than God-as-creator, as being the best translation of the name.

(10) Its origins are obscure and disputed. Its main texts are not more than a thousand years old, but it claims an oral tradition going back to at least the dawn of the Christian era.

(11) *Tikkune Zohar*, Second Lecture, n. 137.

I am - The First Name of God

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Kabbalistic ideas on creation are also derived from their conception of God as 'I am'. In the Jewish tradition creation occurs by the utterance of a single word. The word is the first of all sounds to be heard in manifest existence, and thus parallels the Hindu conception of *Om*. For the Kabbalists this word is none other than the supreme name of God, '*Eyheh*', 'I am'. According to one of their traditions, every creature utters the divine name 'I am' on being created and at the time of its dissolution it repeats the same 'I am' as it is reabsorbed into its maker. This utterance of the divine word 'I am', according to the Kabbala, gives reality to the created world and sustains and upholds it. The uttered 'I am' is an emanation of the unutterable 'I am'; it is God Himself moving from the unmanifest to the realm of manifest being.

An interesting parallel to this idea can be found in *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi* (talk no. 518) where Bhagavan says 'The Supreme Being is unmanifest, and the first sign of manifestation is *aham sphurana* [the radiation or emanation of "I"].'

Bhagavan always maintained that the 'I'-thought rises from the Self and then, quite literally, creates the world it sees and gives it its apparent reality. And, paralleling the Kabbalistic notion, Bhagavan taught that the world ceases to exist when the 'I' is reabsorbed back into the Self.

One should not push parallels between Judaism and Bhagavan's teachings too far, for orthodox Judaism maintains that God is wholly and eternally separate from the world, whereas Bhagavan taught that the Self is the sole reality, and that the world is an appearance *in* it, rather than a creation *of* it. For Bhagavan, the world is being in the same way that God Himself is being, for the two cannot be separated: 'Being absorbed in the reality, the world is also real. There is only being in Self-realisation, and nothing but being.'⁽¹²⁾

Christian theologians have also taken God's revelation of Himself as 'I am' to indicate that His fundamental nature is being, but they will not concede that creation is in any way a manifestation of God's essence. Take, for example, the following statement by a Catholic theologian:

God is the fullness of being, that is, subsistent existence and subsistent reality, not merely as existent being, a real object, but existence itself, reality itself.⁽¹³⁾

This statement, which I am sure Bhagavan would endorse, is not by some maverick interpreter. It comes from a respected theologian and fits comfortably into the mainstream of Catholic thought on the subject of God as being. However, it cannot be interpreted to mean that the world partakes of God's reality because virtually all Christian sects believe that God created the world *ex nihilo*, that is to say 'out of nothing'. Matter, say the Christian theologians, is not a part of Him, nor is it an emanation from or of Him. It is, according to them, quite literally conjured up out of nothing. Although the world is brought into existence by Him, Christians will not accept that it partakes in any way of His essential nature. Views to the contrary are known as pantheism and are condemned by Christian theologians as being erroneous or even heretical. So,

while Christians are fully prepared to accept that God's revelation of Himself as 'I am' means that His fundamental nature is being, they are not prepared to concede that the world partakes of his beingness in any way. In the words of a Vatican Council: 'As being, one sole absolutely simple immutable substance, God is to be declared as really and essentially distinct from the world.'

There is another crucial area in which Bhagavan's teaching differ fundamentally from those of both Judaism and Christianity. Bhagavan taught that 'I am' is not merely the real name of God, it also the real name and identity of each supposedly individual person. Extending the notion to its logical conclusion, Bhagavan maintained that if one could become aware of one's real identity, 'I am', then one simultaneously experienced the 'I am' that is God and the 'I am' that is the substratum of the world appearance. The following quotes are typical and summarise his views on the subject:

It [I am] is the substratum running through all the three states. Wakefulness passes off, I am; the dream state passes off, I am; the sleep state passes off, I am. They repeat themselves and yet I am.(14)

The egoless 'I am' is not a thought. It is realisation. The meaning or significance of 'I' is God.(15)

'I exist' is the only permanent self-evident experience of everyone. Nothing else is so self-evident [*pratyaksha*] as 'I am'. What people call self-evident, viz., the experience they get through the senses, is far from self-evident. The Self alone is that. *Pratyaksha* is another name for Self. So to do self-analysis and be 'I am' is the only thing to do. 'I am' is reality. 'I am this or that' is unreal. 'I am' is truth, another name for Self.(16)

Perhaps the clearest statement in the Ramanasramam literature on the identity of the divine name 'I' and the manifest world comes not from Bhagavan himself, but from Namdev, the 14th century Marathi saint. In his *The Philosophy of the Divine Name*, a work that Bhagavan frequently cited and read out with approval, Namdev explains how the 'I' manifests as the world and how its real nature can be discovered:

The Name permeates densely the sky and the lowest regions and the entire universe The Name itself is form. There is no distinction between Name and form. God became manifest and assumed Name and form there is no mantra beyond the Name. The Name is Keshava [God] Himself The all-pervading nature of the Name can only be understood when one recognises one's 'I'. When one's own name is not recognised, it is impossible to get the all-pervading Name. When one knows oneself, then one finds the Name everywhere. To see the Name as separate from the named creates illusion Surrender yourself at the feet of the Guru and learn to know that 'I' myself is that Name. After finding the source of that 'I', merge your individuality in that oneness which is Self-existent and devoid of all duality.(17)

In most religions of the world, devotees are encouraged to repeat the name of God in order to experience His grace, His presence or even His real nature. The religions of Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism and Islam have conflicting and irreconcilable

metaphysics but there is a surprising degree of agreement among them on the theory and practice of uttering the divine name. The following explanation gives a Muslim point of view, but adherents of all the religions just cited could produce similar expositions from their own traditions:

The Divine Name, revealed by God Himself, implies a Divine Presence which becomes operative to the extent that the Name takes possession of the mind of the person invoking. Man cannot concentrate directly on the Infinite, but by concentrating on the symbol of the Infinite, he attains the Infinite Himself: for when the individual subject becomes identified with the Name to the point where all mental projection is absorbed by the form of the Name, then the Divine Essence manifests spontaneously, since this sacred form tends to nothing outside of itself. It has a positive affinity with Its essence wherein Its limits finally dissolve. Thus it is that union with the Divine Name becomes union with God Himself.

(18)

For Bhagavan the divine name was 'I' or 'I am'. Although, like Namdev, he generally encouraged his devotees to do self-enquiry and reach God by finding the source of the 'I', he was prepared to concede that repetition of the divine name 'I' would lead to the same goal. However, he generally recommended this path only to those who found self-enquiry too hard:

If you find the *vichara marga* [the path of self-enquiry] too hard, you can go on repeating 'I', 'I', and that will lead you to same goal. There is no harm in using 'I' as a mantra. It is the first name of God.(19)

A housewife who complained that self-enquiry was too hard and that she had no time for meditation received a similar answer:

If you can do nothing more, at least continue saying 'I', 'I' to yourself all the time, as advised in *Who Am I?*, whatever you may be doing, and whether you are sitting, standing or walking, 'I' is the name of God. It is the first and greatest of all mantras.(20)

In another answer Bhagavan explained why this method was so successful:

Question: How does the name ['I'] help realisation?

Answer: The original name is always going on, spontaneously, without any effort on the part of the individual. The name is *aham*, 'I'. When it becomes manifest it manifests as *ahamkara* - the ego. The oral repetition of *nama* leads one to mental repetition which finally resolves itself into the eternal vibration.(21)

I should like now to return to the Old Testament and elaborate on another quotation that Bhagavan was fond of citing. In Psalm 46, verse 10, it is written 'Be still and know that I am God'. Bhagavan appreciated this line so much that he sometimes said that the statements 'I am that I am' and 'Be still and know that I am God' contained the whole of Vedanta.(22) In Bhagavan's view the quotations are very closely related for he taught that 'the experience of "I am" is to "Be still"'.(23) The two words 'Be still' denote both the method and the goal for it is through being and through stillness that the 'I am' is revealed: 'If [the mind] is turned within it becomes still in the course of time and that I-AM alone prevails. I AM is the

whole truth.'[\(24\)](#)

When the term is used in its absolute sense, 'being still' is not mere quiescence. As Bhagavan makes clear in the next answer, to attain it one must reach, permanently, the state of pure being in which the separate self has been destroyed:

Question: How is one to know the Self?

Answer: Knowing the Self means 'Being the Self'

Your duty is to be and not to be this or that. 'I am that I am' sums up the whole truth. The method is summed up in 'Be still'. What does stillness mean? It means 'destroy yourself'. Because any form or shape is a cause of trouble. Give up the notion that 'I am so and so'.[\(25\)](#)

'Be still and know that I am God.' Here stillness is total surrender without a vestige of individuality.[\(26\)](#)

All that is required to realise the Self is to 'Be still'.[\(27\)](#)

If one paraphrases Psalm 46, verse 10, to bring out more fully the meaning that Bhagavan attributed to it, it would say, 'Reach the state of pure being and absolute stillness in which the mind is destroyed and one will then experience directly that God is "I am"'.

Bhagavan often stressed that in order to 'Be still and know that I am God' one must be totally free from thought, even the thought 'I am God'. After citing this biblical quote he once added, 'To be still is not to think. *Know* and not *think* is the word.'[\(28\)](#) And on another occasion: 'One should not think "I am this - I am not that". To say "this" or "that" is wrong. They are also limitations. Only "I am" is the truth. Silence is "I"'.[\(29\)](#)

'Being still', according to Bhagavan, requires no thinking and no assertions. On the contrary, it requires a complete absence of both. This attitude was primarily a criticism of the ancient tradition of repeating or thinking 'I am *Brahman*' as a means of attaining liberation. In the following quotation Bhagavan explains how the real meaning of 'I am *Brahman*' has been ignored or missed by commentators and practitioners:

It simply means that *Brahman* exists as 'I' and not 'I am *Brahman*'. It is not to be supposed that a man is advised to contemplate 'I am *Brahman*, I am *Brahman*'. Does a man keep on thinking 'I am a man, I am a man'? He is that, and except when a doubt arises as to whether he is an animal or a tree, there is no need for him to assert 'I am a man'. Similarly, the Self is Self. *Brahman* exists as 'I am' in everything and every being.[\(30\)](#)

At the beginning of this article I explained the ancient Jewish attitude to names, noting how many biblical names revealed something about the person or being who possessed the name. God's name, 'I am', revealed His essential nature; Abraham's his destiny; Jacob's his chief character trait, and so on. At the dawn of the Christian era the belief that names gave an insight into a person's character and destiny was still widely prevalent, so when an angel appeared to Joseph at the beginning of the New Testament, announcing that his wife would bear a son conceived by the Holy Spirit, the meaning of the name given by the angel assumed great significance:

an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, 'Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son and you shall call his

name Jesus, for he will save the people from their sins'.

(Matthew 1:20-21)

The name Jesus is a Greek translation of the Hebrew name *leschouah*, which is itself a contraction of *lehoschouah*. The longer version is not euphonious to Jewish ears, so the shorter version is generally used. The etymology of the longer name produces the meaning, 'Yahweh is salvation', or 'Yahweh helps'. The former meaning has always been more popular, and it is alluded to in the passage I have just cited: 'for he will save the people from their sins.'

Yahweh, it will be remembered, is 'He who is', the name used by the Jews to denote 'I am', the original divine name revealed by God to Moses in Exodus. Since Yahweh is merely a euphemism for 'I am', one can say that Jesus' name also means "'I am" is salvation', or, more generally, 'The Name of God is salvation'. Both ideas were to be major themes in early Christian teachings.

The idea that the Name of God, by itself, could produce salvation, without even being chanted or remembered by the devotee, was a peculiarly Jewish one. Psalm 54:1, for example, begins with the plea, 'Save me, O God, by your name'. For the Jews of the biblical period the Name of God *is* God, not a mere designation or title. For them, the statements, 'The Name of God is salvation', 'God is salvation', and "'I am" is salvation' are all saying the same thing.

When Jesus began his teaching career, He consciously identified Himself with the Yahweh of the Old Testament by calling Himself, on several occasions, 'I am', a name and a title that all Jews knew only God could use.

In one of the most famous New Testament stories Jesus walked on the surface of the Sea of Galilee in order to meet some of His disciples who were fishing there from a boat. Seeing that the disciples were alarmed by His action, Jesus called out to them, 'I am; do not be afraid'.⁽³¹⁾ In most Bible translations the sentence is rendered, 'It is I; do not be afraid', but this is not what the original Greek says. The Greek for 'I am' is *ego eimi*, and these are the only two words that appear before the semicolon. The claim to Godhood was not lost on the disciples. The miraculous feat of walking on the water combined with Jesus' bold assertion 'I am' caused the disciples to exclaim, 'Truly, you are the son of God' (Matthew 14:33). The same sentence, '*Ego eimi*; do not be afraid,' also appears in some manuscripts of Luke 24:36. On that occasion Jesus was appearing to His disciples after His resurrection. Again, most translators have rendered it as 'It is I' rather than 'I am', but the post-resurrectional context makes it more likely that He is declaring his Godhood ('I am') rather than His mere physical presence ('It is I').⁽³²⁾

There is another verse, found in both Luke's and Mark's Gospels, in which Jesus uses the words '*ego eimi*' in a most interesting way. After predicting the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple, the centre of Jewish worship, Jesus warned John and Andrew of terrible events to come. During the course of His warning he said, 'Many will come in my name, saying "I am", and shall deceive many'.⁽³³⁾ To proclaim oneself as 'I am' is to announce one's divinity, and such a claim would be taken by the Jews to be blasphemy. Evidence of how strictly this injunction was upheld can be found in Mark 14:62-3. In these verses, which give

an account of His trial, Jesus was asked by the Jewish High Priest, 'Are you the Christ, the son of the blessed?' and He replied, 'I am'. This simple statement 'I am' was not taken as a mere affirmative answer, but as a claim to Godhood because the priest angrily exclaimed to the others present, 'You have heard this blasphemy'. The priest's associates agreed with him that it was blasphemy, for after this reply they condemned Jesus to be executed (14:64). So, going back to Jesus' warning to John and Andrew, when He said that many people would come 'in my name, saying "I am",' He was saying that impostors would appear, claiming to be God Himself, and furthermore claiming that Jesus had sent them. The juxtaposition of 'I am' and 'my name' is particularly interesting, for in the context it is possible to say that Jesus Himself is laying claim to the original divine Name.

The verses I have quoted so far have all come from the synoptic Gospels, the first three books of the New Testament. The fourth Gospel, John's, has a different approach to Jesus' life and teaching and gives a far more prominent place to His affirmations of 'I am'. To understand just how different John's Gospel is, one only needs to make a brief list of what it contains, and what it doesn't, and then compare these items with the contents of the other Gospels. Unlike the other Gospels, there is no account of the birth of Jesus or of His baptism and temptations; there is no account of the last supper or His ascension; no healing of people possessed by devils and spirits, a major theme in the synoptic Gospels; there are no parables whatsoever; and finally, Jesus' speeches in John are long dignified pronouncements, often a whole chapter long, rather than the short pithy sayings that typify the synoptic accounts.

Next: [Jesus wanted to make the Name of God more widely known so that It could be used, believed in or focused on as a means of experiencing God](#)

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(12) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 33.

(13) *God* [an anthology of essays on God]. Ch.4, 'God, the fullness of being, spirit and reason', by the Rev. L. W. Geddes, 1930 ed., p. 119.

(14) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 244.

(15) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 226.

(16) *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 22nd March, 1946.

(17) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 448.

(18) *Introductions aux Doctrines Esoterique de l'Islam*, T. Burckhardt, p. 101. I think Bhagavan would agree with this, even the remark about the Name merely being 'the symbol of the absolute'. In *Talks* (no. 112) he says, 'Reality is that which transcends all concepts, including that of God. In as much as the name of God is used, it cannot be true.' However, he qualified this by adding, 'The Hebrew word Jehovah, meaning 'I am' expresses God correctly. Absolute Be-ing is beyond expression.'

(19) *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 8th May 1946.

(20) *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 28th June 1946. In *Who Am I?*, Bhagavan wrote, 'Even if one constantly thinks 'I', 'I', one will be led to that place [the Heart]'.

(21) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 591. This exchange took place after Bhagavan had read out Namdev's *The Philosophy of the Divine Name*.

(22) See, for example, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 338.

(23) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 226.

(24) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 503.

(25) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 363.

(26) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 354.

(27) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 379.

(28) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 131.

(29) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 248.

(30) *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 22nd November 1945.

(31) Matthew 14:27, Mark 6:50 and John 6:20.

(32) Three verses later (24:39) He does identify Himself by saying 'It is I', so both forms of identification are present in this passage.

(33) Mark 13:6, Luke 21:8. Matthew also reports the event but has Jesus say 'I am the Messiah' rather than 'I am'.

John's Gospel was written decades after the other three had been composed, and innumerable theories have been propounded to explain why its approach and style are so different from the other Gospels. An early judgement, which has stood the test of time, was put forward by Saint Clement of Alexandria, who, writing around AD 230, claimed that 'John, perceiving that what had reference to the bodily things of Jesus' ministry had been sufficiently related, and encouraged by friends, and inspired by the Holy Spirit, wrote a spiritual Gospel'. That is to say, John was more interested in proclaiming what Jesus was than what He did. He wanted to explain the significance and meaning of Jesus' appearance on earth, rather than merely chronicling the physical events of His life. It is in this context that the 'I am' statements in John acquire added significance.

What are these statements and how are they phrased? Biblical scholars have distinguished two major categories: (1) simple assertions that He is 'I am', that is to say, God manifesting through a human body, and (2) more complex assertions in which He described the nature and function of the 'I am' in a series of common, everyday metaphors. I will list and discuss the quotations that fit into the former category first.

1. The woman at the well: Jesus asked for a drink from a Samaritan woman who was pulling water from a well. During the course of a long philosophical conversation the woman, who had already become convinced of Jesus' greatness, asked Him whether she should worship God on the mountain where her ancestors had worshipped, or whether she should go to the Temple at Jerusalem, the place all Jews went to perform ritual acts of worship.

4.21 Jesus said to her, 'Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father.

23 'But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him.

24 'God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.'

25 The woman said to him, 'I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes he will show us all things'.

26 Jesus said to her, '[I] who speak to you, I am'.[\(34\)](#)

Here we have a simple but bold declaration by Jesus that He is both God Himself as 'I am' and the Messiah who has been sent to save the world.

The exact formulation of this 'I am' statement owes as much to the book of Isaiah as to Exodus, for in Isaiah God repeatedly identifies Himself as 'I' and on one occasion (52:6) speaks a phrase that is very similar to the one Jesus used. In 52:5 God takes note of the fact that His name is despised by the Assyrians, who were then oppressing the Jews, before going on to say: 'Therefore my people shall know my name; therefore in that day they shall know it is I who speak; here am I.' (RSV)

Since the word 'am' does not appear in the original Hebrew, the last portion could be more accurately rendered as ' it is "I" who speak; behold, "I".' This is almost identical in sense and implication to Jesus' later words, cited above: 'I who speak to you, I am.' It should also be noted that 'behold "I"' is associated with an earlier part of the sentence in which God says that 'my people shall know my name'.

The Jews of the biblical period had long been waiting for the Messiah to come. By using the name 'I am' and by using other phrases by which God identified Himself in the Old Testament, Jesus was conveying to His audience, many of whom would have been familiar with these Old Testament texts, that He was their ancestral God, 'I am', functioning through a human body. The Jews were accustomed to having God identify Himself as 'I', for Isaiah is liberally sprinkled with such statements. In 43:11 He says, 'I, I, Yahweh [He who is]; beside me there is no saviour'.⁽³⁵⁾ In this and the succeeding two verses there are twenty-nine words in the original Hebrew. Twelve of them are first-person words such as 'I' or 'my', and the first-person pronoun repeats itself five times.

Most of the Isaiah 'I' phrases are in the form of 'I am He' rather than simply 'I' or 'I am'.⁽³⁶⁾ And since 'am' is not present in the original Hebrew, God is actually saying 'I-He' rather than 'I am He'. This is probably a contraction of 'I, I, Yahweh', a variant that appears in 43:11. Most of these 'I-He' verses indicate either God's transcendence or His omnipotence:

43:10 I-He: before me there was no God.

43:11 I, I, Yahweh; beside me there is no saviour

43:13 Yea, before the day was, I-He.

This verse echoes the most famous of all John's 'I am' quotes. In 8:58, where he has Jesus say 'Before Abraham was, I am,' he is merely confirming what Yahweh had said in Isaiah 43:13: that before time and the world began, 'I', the 'I' that is God, existed, untrammelled by creation, as He who is.

2. The address to the Pharisees in the temple: In Chapter eight Jesus got into a long dispute with the Pharisees in the Jerusalem Temple. He responded to their various complaints and questions from a lofty 'I am not of this world' position, while twice declaring (vv. 24 and 28) that 'I am' provided a route to salvation:

8:19 They said to him therefore, 'Where is your Father?' Jesus answered, 'You know neither me nor my Father; if you knew me you would know my Father also'.

21 'I am going away and you will seek me and die in your sins; where I am going you cannot come.'

22 'Will he kill himself since he says "Where I am going you cannot come"?'

23 He said to them, 'You are from below, I am from above; you are of this world, I am not of this world'.

24 'I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am.'

25 They said to him, 'Who are you?' Jesus said to them, 'Even what I have told you from the

beginning'.

- 28 So Jesus said, 'When you have lifted up the Son of Man, you will know that I am, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak thus as the Father taught me'.

In this fascinating passage Jesus is not merely saying that He is the 'I am'. He is saying that belief in Him, that 'I am', is essential for those who do not want to die in a state of sin. Note also that in verse twenty-eight He states that it is quite possible to 'know' this 'I am', and that when one knows 'I am' one will also understand Jesus' state and His statement that, of His own accord, He could do nothing.

The second half of verse twenty-five, in the original Greek, is very hard to decipher, and the version I have given comes from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Other versions include:

- a) I declare to you that I am the beginning.
- b) Everything I am saying to you is only a beginning.
- c) Primarily, essentially, I am what I am telling you.
- d) How is that I even speak to you at all?

I am not qualified to offer an opinion as to which of these is more likely to be correct. I will merely note that versions (a) and (c) seem to fit in quite well with the theme of Jesus' assertions, both before and after this verse, that He is the 'I am', and that the 'I am' is the route to salvation.

3. *The betrayal by Judas*: In order to convince His disciples that He was 'I am', Jesus told them, after washing their feet prior to the last supper, that one of them would eventually betray Him: 'I tell you now,' He said, 'before it takes place; that when it does take place you may believe that I am.' (13:19)

Later, when Judas, the one who betrayed Him, brought the soldiers and priests to arrest Him, Jesus twice identified Himself as 'I am':

- 18:4 Jesus came forward and said to them, 'Whom do you seek?'
- 5 They answered, 'Jesus of Nazareth'. Jesus said to them 'I am'.
- 6 When he said to them 'I am,' they drew back and fell to the ground.
- 7 Again he asked, 'Whom do you seek?' and they answered 'Jesus of Nazareth'.
- 8 Jesus answered, 'I told you that I am'.

Most versions of the Bible have Jesus say 'I am he' in verse five even though the original merely says 'I am' (*ego eimi*). Many commentators have noted that the literal answer, 'I am,' gives added significance to verse six. The soldiers are overawed by this declaration of Godhood and fall to the ground. An 'I am he' answer, meaning, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth whom you seek', would not have produced such an extreme response.

What was the purpose of these repeated identifications? One reason was that Jesus wanted to establish His credentials as God incarnate, sent to earth to redeem suffering humanity. 'I have manifested thy name to the men whom thou gavest me out of the world,' says Jesus to God in John 17:6. That is to say, the divine Name, 'I am', became incarnate for the sake of those in the world who needed salvation. It can also be argued that in repeatedly

identifying Himself as 'I am', Jesus wanted to make the Name of God more widely known so that It could be used, believed in or focused on as a means of experiencing God:

O righteous Father, the world has not known thee, but I have known thee; I made known to them thy name, and I will make it known, that the love with which thou hast loved me may be in them, and I in them. (John 17:25-6)

Jesus Himself prayed to God, 'Father glorify thy name' (John 12:28)(37) and taught His disciples to revere the Name in their own prayers by saying, 'Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name'. (Matthew 6:9)

The early Christians accepted that the Name of God had great power, and that it could be used as a means to salvation, but the name they adopted was not the 'I am' that God and Jesus both revealed. It was Kyrios, a Greek word that means 'Lord' in the sense of being a king. To understand how this came about one needs to trace the development of the Name through its various mutations.

God originally revealed Himself as 'I am', adding that this was the name by which He wanted 'to be remembered throughout all generations' (Exodus 3:15). 'I am' was too holy a name for the Jews to use so they recorded it as Yahweh, meaning 'He is' or 'He who is' in their written texts. But when they spoke of God they used a further euphemism, Adonai, which merely means 'Lord' or 'my Lord' because it was prohibited to say the name of Yahweh out loud. Instead of using the name Yahweh or 'I am' for God, the authors of the New Testament used the word Kyrios, meaning 'Lord' because that was the word that the *Septuagint*, the already existing Greek translation of the Old Testament, had used as a translation of Yahweh.

By adopting the word Kyrios, the early Christians were using a term that they felt conveyed the idea of Jesus' kingship. Psalm 110:1 says, 'Yahweh said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand"'. The early Christians took this 'Lord' to be Jesus in His risen, ascended state, and they believed that after His ascension He sat next to God in heaven, exercising, like a king, spiritual dominion over the world. The word Kyrios was originally only meant to describe the risen Christ, but slowly, over time, it became the accepted Greek word for the God of the Old Testament.

By these progressive mutations - 'I am' to Yahweh to Adonai to Kyrios - the impact and significance of God's original Name, 'I am', was lost. By this change in vocabulary, He became in the eyes of the early Christians not 'I am' but a Divine King who received homage from His subjects. When Paul, for example, wrote to the Phillippians that 'God has highly exalted him [Jesus] and bestowed on him the name which is above every name,' he was not referring to 'I am', as he makes clear in the succeeding lines: 'That at the name of Jesus, every knee shall bow, every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord [Kyrios].' (Phillippians 2:9-11) The statement 'Jesus is Kyrios', rather than 'Jesus is "I am"' became one of the earliest and most widespread affirmations of Christian belief.

The change from Yahweh to Kyrios was a deliberate and calculated one, and even Old Testament verses were adapted to conform to the new terminology. When the author of Acts wrote, 'And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord [Kyrios] shall be saved,' he was merely changing the vocabulary of an

almost identical Old Testament quote: 'And it shall come to pass that whomsoever shall call on the name of the Lord [Yahweh] shall be delivered.'⁽³⁸⁾ Sometimes, especially in Acts, the name of Jesus Christ alone (that is, not even Yahweh or Kyrios) is proclaimed as being the ultimate and most powerful name. It was by calling on this name that the earliest disciples performed miraculous cures. When Peter saw a lame man begging outside the Beautiful Gate of the Temple, he told him:

'I have no silver and gold, but I will give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.' And he took him by the hand and raised him up; and immediately his feet and ankles were made strong.' (Acts 3:6-8)

When he was subsequently asked, 'By what power or by what name did you do this?' he replied:

Be it known to you all, and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead, by him this man is standing before you well.⁽³⁹⁾

I have noted on several occasions that the Name had a special significance for the Jews. It was not merely a title, it was a manifestation of God Himself. The earliest Christians, who were all brought up in the Jewish tradition, took this conception, applied it to Jesus, and taught that salvation could be attained through His Name. When Christianity spread to the non-Jewish world, it encountered people, countries and whole civilisations that had no tradition of regarding names in such a holy and powerful way. So, as Christianity spread and evolved, the early emphasis on the Name became sidelined and was increasingly replaced by another teaching, which had always been present in and central to the Church's beliefs: that salvation could be attained merely by accepting that Jesus was the son of God and that He died in order to save mankind from the consequences of its sins. Anyone who accepted this became reborn spiritually. It is worth noting that in the first decades of the Christian era some of the most popular competing pagan cults were the mystery religions of the Greek world that generally revolved around the death of a god and the concomitant idea that his death or sacrifice enabled his devotees to be spiritually reborn. It was in these surroundings and against this background that the importance of the crucifixion grew and the significance of the Name of God diminished.

John, who wrote his Gospel around AD 100,⁽⁴⁰⁾ must have witnessed these developments with interest, and perhaps even concern. The synoptic Gospels, Acts and virtually all the epistles were in existence and were being circulated prior to the writing of the final Gospel, and it is reasonable to assume, though it cannot be proved, that John had gone through much of the Christian literature that preceded him. Many scholars feel that John recorded his own experiences with Christ not merely to supplement the existing literature, but to correct some of the mistaken ideas that he felt had sprung up about Christ and His teachings, and to express what he felt were the real truths of Christianity in philosophical terms and structures that the Greek civilisation he lived in would understand. While writing his account, he refuted some of the unchristian heresies that were being put about by the newly emerging Gnostics; he played down the importance of John the Baptist, who was

beginning to develop a cult of his own; and on a more positive note he stressed the divinity of Jesus, His status as the Son of God, the glory of God, and Christ's union with Him. Only in John does Jesus Himself say that He is the Son of God (10:36) and it is John alone who records Jesus' famous remark, 'I and the Father are one'. (10:30) The various 'I am' proclamations I have given are part of this pattern. They affirm that God has incarnated in the form of His Son, and indicate that though the Two (Father and Son) are separate as Persons, in essence they are the same 'I am'.

There are several other occasions in which Jesus alludes to Himself somewhat indirectly as 'I am'. These are known as the I-am-with-predicate statements, and they include such famous remarks as, 'I am the way, the truth and the life,' 'I am the light of the world,' and 'I am the bread of life'. These statements usually appear in carefully constructed stories that often begin with a miraculous event or a deep spiritual analogy and end with a majestic 'I am' pronouncement by Jesus.

Take, for example, the story in which Jesus miraculously fed 5,000 people with five loaves and two fishes. On the following day He told His disciples, 'Do not labour for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to eternal life I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger and he who believes in me shall never thirst.'[\(41\)](#) (John 6:27, 35)

The I-am-with-predicate comment gives a spiritual interpretation to the miracle, affirms Jesus' divine nature as 'I am' while simultaneously proclaiming that through Him salvation can be attained.

Here are a few more example of similar narratives:

a) At the beginning of chapter nine Jesus saw a blind man and cured him. Before doing so He commented, 'As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' (9:5) The man's blindness was a metaphor for the spiritual blindness into which the world had been plunged. By giving sight to the man and by saying 'I am the light,' He was indirectly saying that the Son of God, as 'I am', could banish spiritual darkness. The idea that Jesus is Light is a major and recurring theme in John. He began his Gospel by saying that Christ, as the Son of God made manifest, was the 'light of men' come to earth to dispel spiritual darkness, and the metaphor reappears at regular intervals. In chapter eight, for example, He announced, 'I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life'. (8:12)

b) In chapter two Jesus compared Himself to the door that opens into a sheep pen: 'He who does not enter the sheepfold by the door, but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber; but he who enters by the door is the shepherd of the sheep. To him the gatekeeper opens; the sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.' (10:1-4) In explaining the analogy Jesus said, 'I am the door of the sheep I am the door; if anyone enters by me he will be saved I am come that they might have life, and have it abundantly I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father.' (10:7, 9-11, 14-15) The message of the repeated 'I am's' in the explanation is that Jesus, 'I am' incarnate, is the sole route to union with the Father.

The I-am-with-predicate statements are not to be found in the synoptic Gospels, though there are passages there, called 'the

parables of the kingdom', which serve a similar purpose. 'The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed,' says Jesus in Matthew. 'It is the smallest of all seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs.' (13:31-2) In other places He compared the kingdom of heaven to the leaven in dough and to a sower who sows seeds. The kingdom-of-heaven parables are similes, for they say what heaven is like. John's 'I am' statements, on the contrary, are metaphors that say what God really is: 'I am the bread,' 'I am the light,' 'I am the door'.

Next: ['I-am' is the door through which one must pass if one wants to attain union with the Father.](#)

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(34) RSV has 'I who speak to you am he' but there is no 'he' in the original text.

(35) The second half of the verse may also mean 'and none but I can deliver'.

(36) See 43:13, 25; 46:4; 51:12.

(37) God answered, 'I have glorified it and I will glorify it again'.

(38) Acts 2:21 and Joel 2:32

(39) Acts 4:7, 10, 12. See also 4:30 'signs and wonders are performed through the name of thy holy servant Jesus'.

(40) While it is generally accepted that the contents of John's Gospel record the observations and ideas of John, one of Jesus' direct disciples, the author is believed to be someone else. The most favoured candidate is John the Elder, one of the disciple John's contemporaries.

(41) See also 6:51 in which, in continuation of the same story, He says, 'I am the living bread'.

I am - The First Name of God

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A comment by Bhagavan is appropriate here:

The only permanent thing is Reality, and that is the Self. You say 'I am,' 'I am going,' 'I am speaking,' 'I am walking,' etc. Hyphenate 'I am' in all of them. Thus, I-AM. That is the abiding and fundamental Reality. This truth was taught by God to Moses: 'I am that I am,' 'Be still and know that I-am God' So, 'I-am' is God.(42)

So, if one follows Bhagavan's advice and hyphenates 'I-am', one comes up with: 'I-am' is the bread that will dispel all hunger; 'I-am' is the light that will dispel spiritual ignorance; 'I-am' is the door through which one must pass if one wants to attain union with the Father.

c) In chapter thirteen Jesus tells His disciples that He is going to leave them physically and that 'Where I am going you cannot come'. (13:33) Later He said that He was going to His Father's house, that He would prepare a place for the disciples there, and that eventually they would join Him. Thomas then asked, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father but by me.' (14:5-6) This phrase, when given the hyphenation treatment suggested by Bhagavan, ceases to be a statement that the historical Christ is necessary for all those who want to journey to the 'Father's house', and becomes instead a non-sectarian announcement which states that abidance in the 'I am', the reality of God and Jesus, is the route for all those who are seeking union with the Father.

d) When Jesus was informed of the death of Lazarus, He went to his house and brought him back to life. In the same way that the blind man whom Jesus cured symbolised the darkness that could be overcome by the spiritual light, the raising from the dead of Lazarus symbolised the resurrection that was available to anyone who believed in Jesus as 'I am'. 'I am the resurrection and the life,' said Jesus, shortly before He performed the miracle. 'He who believes in me though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die'. (11:25-6) 'I-am' is the resurrection. Whoever reaches that state and abides in it transcends bodily death.

e) There is one more I-am-with-predicate statement that appears in isolation, unconnected with a miracle or a prior teaching story:

I am the real vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Abide in me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (14:1, 3-5)

When Jesus proclaimed Himself to be 'I am' without adding a predicate, He was signifying His identify with God, the 'I am' who revealed Himself in Exodus. But when He added a predicate, He was not just announcing His Godhood, He was giving Himself a role and a function and was demarcating a relationship between Himself and humanity. He was saying, in effect, that 'I am' is the

light that would illumine man's journey to God, the bread that would sustain him spiritually, the door through which he must eventually pass to reach the Father, the vine, uniting him with the Son, on which his spiritual fruition depends, and the final resurrection which is independent of ordinary bodily existence.

There is one other interesting characteristic of John's Gospel that is worth noting. In the synoptic Gospels Jesus performs healing miracles without any apparent motive other than a compassionate desire to aid the victim. But in John, the few miracles that are reported are performed to manifest the glory of God. The first miracle at Cana in Galilee 'manifested his glory' (2:11); He raised Lazarus from the dead 'for the glory of God so that the Son of Man may be glorified by means of it' (11:4); and in the story of the blind man I have already cited, Jesus noted that he had been brought before Him so 'that the works of God might be made manifest in him'. (9:3) Often the miracles are accompanied by long teaching discourses that culminate in one of Jesus' famous 'I am' statements. For John, these miracles were not casual, random events, or merely occasions to show off Jesus' or God's power, they were what he called '*semeia*,' which means 'signs'. They were teaching demonstrations whose primary purpose was to show ordinary people the glory of God as He manifested His power and authority through His Son. For those who had the discrimination to understand the true import of the discourses, there was an additional bonus: Jesus would give the ultimate 'sign' by saying in various metaphorical ways, 'The "I am" whose power you have just witnessed is among you now. Turn to it and salvation is yours.'

For John, Jesus was the reality of God come down to earth in a human body. There is a Greek word *alethinos*, meaning 'real', which he applies to Jesus on several occasions, sometimes in conjunction with the I-am-with-predicate statements. Jesus is the 'real light' (1:9), He is the 'real bread from heaven' (6:32), He is the 'real vine' (15:1), and to Him belongs the 'real judgement' (8:16). Jesus, for John, was the 'I am' made manifest, the incarnate reality, whose function was to become a human beacon, shining the 'real light' in a shadowy world whose spiritual darkness would otherwise prevent man from being able to perceive God. (1:5)

And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding to know him [God] who is real.

And we are in him who is real, in his Son Jesus Christ.

This is the real God and eternal life. Little children, keep yourself from idols. (I John 5:20-1)

Through Jesus Christ, the reality, God as 'I am' can be known. To approach Him through other forms, other names, is, said John, tantamount to idolatry, because it sets up for worship an unreal image of God.

I noted earlier that one of the factors that motivated John to write his Gospel was a desire to write a spiritual and interpretative account, rather than a merely biographical narrative. His intention was to stress the real teachings of Jesus and to refute erroneous ideas about Him. When John talks about the Name of God, he is, like all Jews of his generation, talking about God Himself, the Yahweh who revealed Himself in Exodus.⁽⁴³⁾ It must have saddened him to see Yahweh transmuted into Kyrios, a different concept altogether, and for the ancient tradition of the Name to wither in the inhospitable soil of the non-Jewish world. Jesus had

declared Himself to be 'I am' a few times in the synoptic Gospels, but His declarations there did not appear to have had much significance for the early Christians. It was left to John to resurrect the tradition. He had Jesus identify Himself as 'I am' more times than in the other three Gospels combined, and in his I-am-with-predicate statements, none of which can be found in the synoptic Gospels, he simultaneously identified Jesus with the Old Testament 'I am' and mapped out a path by which Christians could approach the Father and become one with Him.

John's efforts did not meet with much ultimate success. Little attention was paid, either then or subsequently, to his attempt to put Jesus' identification with 'I am' in the centre of Christian beliefs. Nowadays, if one looks for an explanation of the 'I am' statements in Bible commentaries, one finds that they are often ignored or relegated to footnotes and appendices. They tend to be regarded as a minor puzzle rather than a major revelation.

So far as I am aware, only one Christian group has given pride of place to Jesus' revelation that He is 'I am', and that is a modern twentieth century organization, 'The Infinite Way', which was founded by the Christian mystic Joel Goldsmith. After many years in the Christian Science movement, the inner 'I' revealed itself to him. By abiding in it he came to realise that this inner 'I' was God Himself. This gave him new insights into the nature of Christ's teachings, particularly those that were revealed in the Gospel of John. He eventually started his own group, teaching all who came to him that God is within, shining as the 'I'. More than twenty books appeared under his name, most of them being edited collections of his teachings. I have selected a few of his statements on the nature of God as 'I' or 'I am' and given them below. All of them have been taken from *The Mystical 'I'*, a book that relates the author's own experience of 'I am' and also gives his explanations of the 'I am' statements that appear in John's Gospel. Readers will note that his exegesis of the biblical texts is very similar to my own, and that his teachings on the nature of 'I' and the means by which it can be experienced are very similar to those propounded by Ramana Maharshi:

'I stand at the door and knock.' Who is this 'I' standing at the door? And at what door is this 'I' standing? At what door but the door of your consciousness? 'I' stand at the door of your consciousness and knock, but you must open the door and admit *Me*, for 'I am the bread of life I am the way, the truth and the life I am the resurrection and the life I am come that you might have life, and that you might have it more abundantly.'

The 'I' that is standing at the door of your consciousness and knocking is the 'I' that has come that you might have life more abundant. When you admit that 'I' into your consciousness, you have admitted life eternal: the bread of life, the water of life, and the wine of life. You have admitted into your consciousness the power of resurrection

Close your eyes and within yourself, silently, sacredly, secretly and gently say the word 'I, I'. That 'I' in the midst of you is mighty. That 'I' in the midst of you is greater than any problem in the outside world. That 'I' in the midst of you is come that you might have life and

have it more abundantly. That 'I' has been with you since 'before Abraham was', waiting your recognition and your acknowledgement. 'Know ye not ye are the temple of God?

Know ye not that the name of God is 'I' or 'I am', and that you are the temple of God only when you have admitted 'I' into your consciousness and held it there secretly, sacredly, gently, peaceably, so that at any moment you can close your eyes and just remember 'I'?

When Jesus speaks of the Father within and when Paul speaks of the Christ that dwells in him they are speaking of the I AM, the very 'I' that you are, the 'I' that you have just announced, that is in the midst of you.(44)

It may take a month or a year, or ten years before you can break the crust of personal sense and finally hear that still small voice within yourself, but when you do it says to you, 'Be still and know that I am God'. It does not say that Joel or Mary is God. No, no! It does not say that William or Robert is God, or Mildred. It always says 'I'. And do you know what else it says? 'Fear not for I am with thee I will never leave thee nor forsake thee.' Fear not. Though your sins be scarlet, in the moment of your recognition of 'I' in the midst of you, you are white as snow.(45)

To be sure that no one misses the way, we caution our students never to say, even to themselves, 'I am God'. It is not even wise to voice such a statement as 'I am the son of God'. The ideal way is just to say 'I'. And think what It means. Then in time, as the listening ear is developed, you will hear the voice say, "'I" in the midst of you am God. "I" who am closer to you than breathing am God.' When you hear this, you have made contact with your source.(46)

The unveiled truth in every age has always been the revelation that 'I' am He: there is no other. There is only one Ego, only one Selfhood, the AM THAT I AM, that 'I' in the midst of us, the divine Selfhood of you and me.

Abide in the word 'I'. Let this 'I' abide in you and recognise its identity. Never let anyone veil It for you again. Keep it sacred and secret.(47)

The minute you have an image of God in your thought, you are personalizing, and you are expecting that concept to be God, and a concept cannot be God. Only 'I' can be God, and you cannot have a mental image of 'I'. That is the one word that defies description. Try as you will, you cannot make a mental image of 'I'.(48)

Whether you say that God is Omniscience, Omnipotence and Omnipresence, or that Jesus is Omniscience, Omnipotence and Omnipresence, really makes no difference, because in either case you have set up God and Jesus as separate and apart from the Self which you are, the 'I' which you are. When, however, you bring it all down to 'I and the Father are one', and know that 'I' is Omniscience, Omnipotence and Omnipresence, in the oneness you are infinite in being. In this oneness

the 'I' of you is immortality.(49)

One of the most important statements in the New Testament is the passage, 'I am the way'. The incorrect interpretation of these few words has kept the world in spiritual darkness for seventeen hundred years

Rightly interpreted, the words 'I am the way', mean what they say. The way, the truth and the life more abundant are to be found in 'I', the 'I' that I am, the 'I' that you are, for you have been told that you and your father are one. It is in his word 'I' that you find the entire secret of the spiritual message given to the world by Christ Jesus.(50)

God is not a person. God is not localized as the mind of some one person: God is being. But God is infinite being; therefore God must be your being and my being. That is why we can accept 'I' as the name of God because I have the name 'I' and you have the name 'I'. Each of us is 'I'. Each one of us is 'I' and God is that infinite 'I' in us.(51)

When you know the secret of 'I', you abide in stillness and let 'I' do its work; not you - 'I', that 'I' that is in the midst of you. You need no thoughts, since you cannot and need not enlighten God.(52)

The idea that Jesus indirectly taught a *sadhana* of concentrating on God as an inner feeling of 'I am' will probably sound strange and even a little dubious to most Christians. They would, in response, more than likely point out that Jesus never directly asked his followers to be aware of God in themselves as 'I am', and add that the only practice he overtly endorsed was that of *bhakti*. This, they would probably go on to say is clearly pointed out in Mark's Gospel:

'Which commandment is the first of all?' [asked a scribe]. Jesus answered, "Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength". The second is this, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself". There is no commandment greater than these.' (Mark 12:28-31)

In giving this answer Jesus was repeating and embellishing on the great Jewish proclamation of faith and practice that was originally given to the Israelites by Moses (Deuteronomy 6:4-5):

4 Hear O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord;

5 And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might.

The word 'Lord,' mentioned three times in these two verses, is, in the original Hebrew, Yahweh, the term the Jews used to denote the 'I am' who revealed Himself to Moses. In addition to this rendering, which I have taken from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, three other readings can be regarded as acceptable translations:

a) Hear O Israel: Yahweh, our God, Yahweh is One.

b) Hear O Israel: Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is One.

c) Hear O Israel: Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone.

Next: ['Deep in his heart, the Indian seer heard with rapture the same 'I AM' that Moses heard on Mount Horeb.'](#)

(42) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 503.

(43) John uses Kyrios many times as a respectful title without associating it with the name of God. He also uses it in the traditional early Christian way to signify the risen Christ.

(44) From *The Mystical I*, by Joel Goldsmith, pp. 1-2. Unwin Paperbacks 1981.

(45) *Ibid.*, p. 20.

(46) *Ibid.*, p. 21.

(47) *Ibid.*, p. 23.

(48) *Ibid.*, p. 80.

(49) *Ibid.*, p. 34.

(50) *Ibid.*, p. 39.

(51) *Ibid.*, p. 68.

(52) *Ibid.*, p. 65.

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Once one knows that Yahweh denotes God as 'I am', the significance of the following verse becomes more apparent; 'and you shall love Yahweh, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might'. That is to say, both Moses and Jesus were saying, indirectly, that heart, soul and mind must be directed exclusively and lovingly towards the 'I am' that is God. Jesus said that there was no greater commandment than this, and Moses, emphasising the same point, went on to tell the Israelites:

And these words [Deuteronomy 6:4-5] which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:6-9)

In fulfilment of this command, orthodox Jews attend their synagogues wearing phylacteries on their foreheads and hands that contain copies of these verses from Deuteronomy. They also have copies in special containers that are attached to their door and gateposts. Some devout Jews even kiss the container reverently each time they enter and leave as a gesture of respect towards Yahweh, the one God who revealed Himself to Moses as 'I am'. Verse four in particular is the greatest and most widespread affirmation of faith for all Jews. Whatever their mother tongue, and irrespective of what country they live in, all practising Jews regularly recite verse four in the original biblical Hebrew.

The *sadhana* of loving God as He really is, as 'I am,' with all one's heart, having rejected all other thoughts, is identical to the path of true devotion as taught by Bhagavan on many occasions:

Question: That is why I am asking you whether God could be worshipped through the path of love.

Bhagavan: Love itself is the actual form of God, If by saying, 'I do not love this, I do not love that,' you reject all things, that which remains is *swarupa*, that is, the real form of the Self. That is pure bliss. Call it pure bliss, God, *atma* or what you will. That is devotion, that is realisation, that is everything.

If you thus reject everything, what remains is the Self alone. That is real love. One who knows the secret of that love finds the world itself full of universal love. (53)

Jesus instructed his followers that they should not merely love God with all their heart, they should also love their neighbours as themselves. Here Bhagavan is saying that this automatically happens when the first commandment, loving God with all one's heart, is fulfilled. When one experiences 'Love the actual form of God', the world itself, including all possible neighbours, is experienced as one's own Self, and is found to be 'full of universal love'.

The experience of not forgetting consciousness ['I am'] alone is the state of *bhakti*, which is the relationship of

unfading real love, because the real knowledge of Self, which shines in the undivided supreme bliss itself, surges up as the nature of love. Only if one knows the truth of love, which is the real nature of Self, will the strong entangled knot of life be untied. Only if one attains the height of love will liberation be attained. Such is the heart of all religions. The experience of Self is only love, which is seeing only love, hearing only love, feeling only love, tasting only love and smelling only love, which is bliss.(54)

I should not like to give the impression that the interpretations I have given represent the teachings of any major Church or denomination I know about. However, much to my surprise, the Pope devoted his Easter message in 1992 to an explanation of some of 'I am' quotes in the Bible. I heard it live on the radio in my room at [Sri Ramanasramam](#) and found it to be a stunning example of synchronicity since I was compiling this article at the time. When I discovered that none of my local Catholic churches had received a copy, I wrote to the Vatican directly, expecting to receive the official version of this speech, along with a covering letter from a minor official. Instead, several months later, I received a rather charming letter that stated, 'His Holiness has been very busy lately and regrets the delay in answering your letter. Enclosed is a copy of his *Urbi et Orbi* [To the city and to the world] Easter address that you requested.'

URBI ET ORBI ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II
EASTER SUNDAY
(19 April 1992)

1. "I Am" (Jn 8:24).
The women went to the tomb;
they found it empty
and heard the message: He is not here!
Why do you seek among the dead him who is alive?
He has risen! (cf. Lk 24:5-6).
"I Am".
2. Long before, Moses had asked God his Name:
"I am who am" - came the reply
from the burning bush (Ex 3:14).
I AM - the name of God, of "Yahweh".
And Jesus said to the children of Israel:
Before Abraham was, I AM" (Jn 8:58)
- and then they tried to stone him.
He also said:
"When you have lifted up the Son of man,
then you will know that I AM" (Jn 8:28).
Then they lifted up the Son of man on the Cross
and, when he was already dead,
they struck his side with the lance
and placed his lifeless body in the tomb.
But on the third day, early in the morning,
from the empty tomb comes the confirmation: I AM.
The life and death of the Son of man
are rooted in the immortality
of HIM who IS.
3. "I am with you".
These are Christ's words to the Apostles
and he sends them put into the whole world
to preach the Gospel to all peoples (cf. Mk 16:15).
He sends them out poor and vulnerable.
He says: "You shall be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8).
Take nothing for your journey (cf. Mk 6:8).

Having the witness of the Resurrection and the life
you have everything: I AM with you
"Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel"
exclaims the Apostle (1 Cor 9-16) ... Woe to me!
"The love of Christ controls us!" (2 Cor 5-14).
What other good news could there be,
apart from this, that Christ died
for the sins of all and rose again?
That in him mortal human life
has been rooted in the immortality
of HIM who IS?

4. "I AM with you".
From these words began
all the apostolic journeys,
all the missionary travels
which have carried the Gospel into the whole world.
"I AM with you":

Although the Pope chose this subject for one of the key speeches in the Catholic calendar, mainstream Christianity has never taught that God can be approached by abiding in the inner feeling of 'I am'. Those who have advocated such practices have only ever been in a small minority, and they have usually been regarded with deep suspicion by more orthodox members of the Church.

I should like to discuss in the last portion of this article the views and experiences of one man from this small minority who, though a committed Christian, found in the Bible's 'I am' statements a major revelation. They indicated to him both a way to attain union with God and at the same time provided him with a bridge between Christianity and Vedanta.

Swami Abhishiktananda was a Benedictine monk and priest who spent twenty years in a French monastery under his original name and title, Father Henri le Saux. He came to India in the 1940s and soon fell under the spell of Ramana Maharshi. His experiences at [Sri Ramanasramam](#) in 1949 presented him with a challenge, the resolution of which was to occupy his mind and heart for twenty-five years:

In its own sphere, the truth of *advaita* is unassailable. If Christianity is unable to integrate it in the light of a higher truth, the inference must follow that *advaita* includes and surpasses the truth of Christianity, and that it operates on a higher level than that of Christianity.

There is no escape from this dilemma.[\(55\)](#)

Swami Abhishiktananda came to feel that Christians and Hindus, divided by differing and contradictory theologies, could only meet on equal terms in the 'cave of the Heart'. In this 'place' the followers of both religions could experience the 'I am' of God's real nature: 'Deep in his heart, the Indian seer heard with rapture the same 'I AM' that Moses heard on Mount Horeb.'[\(56\)](#)

In my own depth, beyond all perceiving, all thought, all consciousness of distinction, there is the fundamental intuition of my being, which is so pure that it cannot be adequately described. It is precisely here that I meet God, in the mystery at once of my own being and of His. In the last resort, what can I say of myself except that 'I am'. Just so, all that I can truly say of God is simply that 'He is'. This is what was revealed to Moses at Horeb, and it was also realised intuitively by the rishis: 'It is only by saying "He is" that one may reach him.' [*Katha*

Upanishad 6:12] He is - nothing more can be said of Him.(57)

Christianity teaches that God is a Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and that the three will always remain three even in the final experience of 'I am'. It also teaches that God can never be fully known in the way that He knows Himself, so knowledge of Him can only ever be partial. Abhishiktananda initially accepted this idea - he was after all a Catholic priest - and speculated that the final 'I am' experience for a Christian must necessarily be a Trinitarian one in which God was not fully known:

The mysterious name which the Lord had revealed was beyond all human comprehension. The reply 'I am who I am' meant that the Name is permanently withheld from the merely curious enquirer, but at the same time, for the earnest seeker who is moved by love, it constitutes a precious invitation to penetrate to the very heart of the One who essentially is. Yahweh is indeed the name which reveals God, and at the same time conceals Him. (58)

it is a call to the deepest recesses of the human spirit, a call which itself comes from the secret cave of the heart where alone man is really himself. The call is the most powerful reminder that the name of God is indeed mysterious, as the Bible says, that reason alone is incapable of apprehending God, that he remains essentially the Inaccessible One.(59)

In unveiling for man the secret of God, he [Jesus] reveals the last secret of man's own being, the secret that his own origin lies deep within God's infinite love. At the very heart of the dazzling glory of being, he reveals to man the even greater glory of the love in which Being, 'He-who-is', has within himself a three-fold communion with himself.(60)

At this stage of his search Abhishiktananda was saying that the 'I am' that the *rishis* experienced was not the highest state. Beyond this, he said, there is the Christian experience of being in which one knows and experiences God as a Trinity. This conclusion was a natural consequence of his dilemma, stated earlier, that Christians must integrate *advaita* in the 'the light of a higher truth' or concede that the truth of *advaita* 'surpasses the truth of Christianity'. According to Abhishiktananda, in this final state of being there is an awareness of the sharing and the intermingling of the three distinct Persons of the Trinity:

The mystery of the Holy Trinity reveals that Being is essentially a *koinonia* [a fellowship or sharing] of love; it is a communion, a reciprocal call to be; it is being-together, being-with, co-esse [Latin for 'to be with']; its essence is a coming from and a going to, a giving and receiving.(61)

The book I have taken all these quotes from, *Saccidananda*, expounded a view of Christianity that is called 'the theology of fulfilment'. Simply stated, it is the belief that everyone in the world, at some distant future date, will become a Christian. It is underpinned by the belief that the fullest revelation of God can only be had within a Christian framework, and that while other religions may contain interesting and even holy ideas, the practical

application of them cannot result in the highest knowledge of God that is available to a Christian. Thus Abhishiktananda could write that a 'Christian *jnani*' (an oxymoron in my opinion) would have a Trinitarian experience of 'I am' that would be superior to the 'I am' experiences of Hindu sages. This attitude enabled him to write, without feeling at all patronising, 'India become Christian would surely feel a quite special attraction to silent meditation on the name of Yahweh'.⁽⁶²⁾

Towards the end of his life Abhishiktananda finally had, as a consequence of a heart attack that left him temporarily paralysed on a street in Rishikesh, a full realisation of 'I am' which, judging by his description of it, seemed to convince him that his previous attempts to fit it into a Trinitarian framework were presumptuous:

Who can bear the glory of transfiguration, of man's dying as transfigured; because what Christ is I AM! One can only speak of it after being awoken from the dead. It was a remarkable spiritual experience. While I was waiting on my sidewalk, on the frontier of the two worlds, I was magnificently calm, for I AM, no matter what in the world! I have found the GRAIL!⁽⁶³⁾

The finding of the grail was inextricably linked to losing all the previous concepts he had had about Christ and the Church. Commenting on this experience, he said, 'So long as we have not accepted the loss of all concepts, all myths - of Christ, of the Church - nothing can be done.'⁽⁶⁴⁾ From this new experiential standpoint he was able to say, from direct experience, that it was the 'I', rather than a collection of sectarian teachings and beliefs, that gave reality to God:

I really believe that the revelation of AHAM ['I'] is perhaps the central point of the *Upanishads*. And that is what give access to everything; the 'knowing' which reveals all 'knowing'. God is not known, Jesus is not known, nothing is known outside this terribly solid AHAM that I am. From that alone all true teaching gets its value.⁽⁶⁵⁾

In addition to writing several books that attempted to bridge the gap between Hinduism and Christianity, Abhishiktananda was a regular contributor to seminars and conferences on the future development of Indian Christianity. After his great experience he received an invitation to attend a Muslim gathering in France to give a Christian point of view. In declining the invitation he revealed how all his old ideas had been swept away and how he no longer felt able to expound a specifically Christian viewpoint:

The more I go [on], the less able I would be to present Christ in a way which would still be considered as Christian. For Christ is first an idea which comes to me from outside. Even more after my 'beyond life/death experience' of 14.7 [73] I can only aim at awakening people to what 'they are'. Anything about God or the Word in any religion, which is not based on the deep 'I' experience, is bound to be simple 'notion', not existential.

Yet I am interested in no Christology at all. I have so little interest in a Word of God which will awaken man within history. The Word of God comes from/to my own 'present'; it is that very awakening which is my self-

awareness. What I discover above all in Christ is his 'I AM' it is that I AM experience which really matters. Christ Is the very mystery 'that I AM', and in the experience and existential knowledge all Christology has disintegrated.(66)

Then, confirming that a lifetime's convictions had been dropped, he went on to explain that the final Christian experience of 'I am' could not differ from its Hindu equivalent:

What would be the meaning of a 'Christianity-coloured' awakening? In the process of awakening all this colouration cannot but disappear The colouration might vary according to the audience, but the essential goes beyond. The discovery of Christ's I AM is the ruin of any Christian theology, for all notions are burned within the fire of experience I feel too much, more and more, the blazing fire of this I AM in which all notions about Christ's personality, ontology, history etc. have disappeared.(67)

After a lifetime of meditation and research he had finally conceded that no explanation or experience could impinge on the fundamental reality, 'I am', which was revealed to Moses by God. Years before he had predicted that this standpoint would be the inevitable consequence of a full experience of 'I am'. Perhaps even then he was having doubts about the theology of fulfilment and its premises that only through Christianity could the highest experiences be attained:

Doctrines, laws and rituals are only of value as signposts, which point the way to what is beyond them. One day in the depths of his spirit man cannot fail to hear the sound of the I am uttered by He-who-is. He will behold the shining of the Light whose only source is itself, is himself, is the unique Self What place is then left for ideas, obligations or acts of worship of any kind whatever?(68)

When the Self shines forth, the I that has dared to approach can no longer recognise its own self or preserve its own identity in the midst of that blinding light. It has, so to speak, vanished from its own sight. Who is left to be in the presence of Being itself. The claim of Being is absolute All the later developments of the [Jewish] religion - doctrine, laws and worship - are simply met by the *advaitin* with the words originally revealed to Moses on Mount Horeb, 'I am that I am'.(69)

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(53) *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, 2:39.

(54) *Guru Vachaka Kovai*, vv. 974, 652, 655.

(55) *Saccidananda*, by Swami Abhishiktananda, ISPCK, 1974, p. 48.

(56) *Ibid.*, p. 94.

(57) *Ibid.*, pp. 167-8.

(58) *Ibid.*, p. 2.

(59) *Ibid.*, p. 10.

(60) *Ibid.*, p. 100.

(61) *Ibid.*, p. 135.

(62) *Ibid.*, p. 94.

(63) *Swami Abhishiktananda*, by James Stuart, ISPCK, 1989, p. 346.

(64) *Ibid.*, p. 358.

(65) *Ibid.*, p. 356.

(66) *Ibid.*, pp. 348-9.

(67) *Ibid.*, p. 349.

(68) Abhishiktananda, op. cit., p. 46.

(69) *Ibid.*, p. 45.

Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham verse 39

A few weeks ago I saw a query, posted on the Yahoo Ramana Maharshi group site, which asked about the meaning of a Tamil verse that Bhagavan composed in the late 1930s. I contributed my own thoughts on this topic by posting a response, but the verse continued to surface in my mind from time to time, and each time it did, I realised there were extra nuances and sources I could have given. In the end I sat down and expanded my answer into this article, which I hope covers most of the possible meanings, along with some of the published comments on this verse.

This is the translation of the verse that currently appears in *Collected Works*:

Keep *advaita* within the Heart. Do not ever carry it into action. Even if you apply it to all the three worlds, O son, it is not to be applied to the Guru.(1)

Annamalai Swami has given an account of how this particular verse came to be written. It began with the following remarks by Bhagavan:

‘*Advaita* should not be practised in ordinary activities. It is sufficient if there is no differentiation in the mind. If one keeps cartloads of discriminating thoughts within, one should not pretend that all is one on the outside.

‘Westerners practise mixed marriages and eat equally with everyone. What is the use of doing only this? Only wars and battlefields have resulted. Out of all these activities, who has obtained any happiness?

‘This world is a huge theatre. Each person has to act whatever role is assigned to him. It is the nature of the universe to be differentiated but within each person there should be no differentiation.’

I [Annamalai Swami] was so moved by this speech that I asked Bhagavan to summarise these ideas in a written Tamil verse. Bhagavan agreed, took a Sanskrit verse from *Tattvopadesa* [by Adi-Sankaracharya, verse 87] which expresses a similar idea, and translated it into a Tamil *venba*. When he was satisfied with his translation, I also managed to persuade him to write the first fair copy in my diary. This verse was eventually published as verse thirty-nine of *Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham*.(2)

At the beginning of his commentary on this verse Sadhu Om states that Bhagavan composed it on 16th February, 1938.(3) The discussion that Annamalai Swami alluded to may have taken place a few days earlier since a brief summary of an idea from this verse can be found in *Talks* in an entry dated 13th February, 1938.(4) On that day Bhagavan remarked: ‘[the] non-dual idea is advised, but not *advaita* in action. How will one learn *advaita* if one does not find a Master and receive instructions? Is there not duality then?’

Maurice Frydman, the compiler of *I am That* and *Maharshi’s Gospel*, questioned Bhagavan about the first half of this verse and received the following explanation:

Question: Sri Bhagavan has written [*Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham*, verse 39] that one should not show *advaita*

in one's activities. Why so? All are one. Why differentiate?

Bhagavan: Would you like to sit on the seat that I am sitting on?

Question: I don't mind sitting there. But if I came and sat there the *sarvadhikari* [the ashram manager] and the other people here would hit me and chase me away.

Bhagavan: Yes, nobody would allow you to sit here. If you saw someone molesting a woman, would you let him go, thinking, 'All is one'? There is a scriptural story about this. Some people once gathered together to test whether it is true, as said in the *Bhagavad Gita*, that a *jnani* sees everything as one. They took a brahmin, an untouchable, a cow, an elephant, and a dog to the court of King Janaka, who was a *jnani*. When all had arrived King Janaka sent the brahmin to the place of brahmins, the cow to its shed, the elephant to the place allotted to elephants, the dog to its kennel and the untouchable person to the place where the other untouchables lived. He then ordered his servants to take care of his guests and feed them all appropriate food.

The people asked, 'Why did you separate them individually? Is not everything one and the same for you?'

'Yes, all are one,' replied Janaka, 'but self-satisfaction varies according to the nature of the individual. Will a man eat the straw eaten by the cow? Will the cow enjoy the food that a man eats? One should only give what satisfies each individual person or animal.'

Although the same man may play the role of all the characters in a play, his acts will be determined by the role that he is playing at each moment. In the role of a king he will sit on the throne and rule. If the same person takes on the role of a servant, he will carry the sandals of his master and follow him. His real Self is neither increased nor decreased while he plays these roles. The *jnani* never forgets that he himself has played all these roles in the past.(5)

One can have the idea that everything is a manifestation of the Self, and one can attempt to incorporate this idea into one's daily life by treating other people in an egalitarian way. However, all this would all be theoretical since it would be based on an idea of reality instead of stemming from a direct experience of the Self. From the standpoint of the Self 'practising *advaita*' is an oxymoron since in that state there is no longer an entity who can make choices about what should or should not be done. In that state action arises spontaneously from the Self, unmediated by the I-am-the-doer idea. Sadhu Om has elaborated on this important point in his commentary on this verse:

Advaita is the experience of clearly apprehending that, in reality, the Self, being-consciousness, shining continuously as 'I am', alone exists, and that all that appears in duality, consisting of the body, mind and world, is entirely unreal. Therefore, since *doing* belongs to the dualistic state, where the mind and body appear to

be real, non-duality cannot be expressed through *doing*. On the contrary, should anyone think that non-duality might be expressed through *doing*, they would [be showing themselves to] be bereft of the experience of the truth of non-duality.(6)

If, as Bhagavan instructed in the first quotation I gave from *Living by the Words of Bhagavan*, ‘Advaita should not be practised in ordinary activities,’ how is the *sadhaka* to relate to the world, which he still sees as separate from himself? Lakshman Sarma, who received personal lessons from Bhagavan on the meaning of the *Ulladu Narpadu* verses, answers this question in his own comments on this verse:

... it is established that, until the I-am-the-body sense is removed, *advaita* cannot exist. It is fitting then that all the behaviours that occur in this state should respect the rules of duality, and one should act accordingly. It is not possible to implicate *advaita* in these behaviours. If any such attempt is made, impurities will arise through the power of the ego, and man’s dvaitic *vasanas* will wax greater. We observe that even a *jnani* who is established in the advaitic state will not, in his conduct, infringe the rules of dvaitic respect. Bhagavan’s view is that *advaita* is the direct experience of the *jnani*, whilst for the *ajnani*, it is useful for meditation and so on.(7)

It may be difficult to make out the reason for these injunctions [not to attempt to put *advaita* into practice]. But if we remember the power of the ego to pervert and frustrate even honest efforts to realise the truth which would mean its own death we need not be puzzled. Reflection on the truth of *advaita* tends to dissolve the ego and develop devotion to the truth. But action from the advaitic standpoint is suicidal because the enemy [the ego] would be in charge of such action. While ignorance is alive, duality persists in appearing as real, because of the ego sense, and truly advaitic action is impossible. The sage alone can put *advaita* into action, because he is egoless. Hence the sacred lore and also the sage advise us to restrict our activities and not to extend them, so as to give as little scope as possible for the ego to frustrate our efforts.(8)

... theoretical knowledge of the truth of non-duality does not avail to destroy the primary ignorance, so as to raise one to the egoless state in which wrong action would be impossible. So, until that state is won, the ego would be in command of actions, and this warning is therefore necessary.(9)

That is to say, one should strive for *advaita* in the Heart, but in outer activities one should adhere to the dualistic rules of *dharma*.

There are two ideas present in this *Anubandham* verse: the first, which has just been dealt with, is that one should not attempt to practise *advaita* in the day-to-day activities of one’s worldly life; the second is a much more specific injunction that one should never practise *advaita* towards one’s Guru. That is to say, one should never think, ‘All is one. My Guru is the same as I am. Therefore, I don’t have to treat him as someone special since in essence he is

just the same as everything and everyone else.’

Before I begin to deal with this topic I should like to point out that the second half of the verse contains the phrase, ‘Even if you apply it [*advaita*] to all the three worlds...’. One needs to understand what the ‘three worlds’ might denote in order to appreciate the full force of what follows.

Sadhu Om, in his Tamil commentary, has equated (in my opinion, correctly) the ‘three worlds’ mentioned in this verse with the heavenly realms of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva. Having raised this possibility, he then elaborates on its implications:

Though we might speak of a man going to Brahma Loka and addressing Brahma with the words, ‘You and I are one,’ or going to Vishnu Loka and addressing Vishnu saying, ‘You and I are one,’ or going to Siva Loka and addressing Siva saying, ‘You and I are one,’ yet it would never be permissible to address one’s *Sadguru*, saying, ‘You and I are one’. Why? Because someone in the individualised state, though he might, through the power of his austerities, acquire even the powers of creation, preservation and destruction exercised by the Trimurtis, Brahma, Vishnu and Siva, it would be an entirely impossible task for him to obtain the power that belongs [only] to the *Sadguru*, that of destroying the ignorance of others. Thus, the action of destroying *ajnana* ... is vastly more powerful than those three operations that are present in [the state of] *ajnana*. Thus, the power of the *Sadguru*’s grace is vastly superior to the powers of the Trimurtis.(10)

Many respected teachers of *advaita* have said that the Guru is in a higher state, and has more power and authority, than the gods themselves. As this extract maintains, the gods can create, preserve and destroy, but they do not have the ultimate power of destroying the egos of devotees. Some teachers have even maintained that the gods must eventually incarnate on earth and come to an earthly *Sadguru* in order to attain liberation. These gods cannot grant liberation since they themselves are not liberated. This position, of course, would probably be vigorously challenged by devotees of these particular deities.

Bhagavan seemed to endorse the supremacy of the *Sadguru* in these matters. Verse 800 of *Guru Vachaka Kovai*, which is derived from a famous verse in *Guru Gita*, reads:

The words of sages say that if one does wrong [*apacharam*] to God, it can be rectified by the Guru, but an *apacharam* done to the Guru cannot be rectified even by God.(11)

In his commentary on this verse Muruganar noted: ‘... even if one swerves from the vedic codes, one should never disobey the Guru’s words. Thus it is stressed that devotion to the Guru is greater than devotion to God.’(12)

Lakshman Sarma has noted that there is an important reason why one should revere the Guru as a living manifestation of the Self, and as an embodiment of the divine power that can bestow liberation.

Only that devotion to the Guru is good which is rendered to a sage-Guru, and which regards him as identical with God. Only by such devotion does one attain freedom

from delusion. Truly the sage is not other than God.

[Also] there is the text of the *Upanishads*, that one who wants deliverance must worship the knower of the Self.

If he thinks of him [the sage, who is the Guru] as other than God, that thought will obstruct his path.(13)

In a comment on one of these two verses Lakshman Sarma wrote: 'The sage who is accepted as one's Guru must not be regarded as just a human being, a person, but as an incarnation of God Himself, because that is the truth of the sage, and because, if the Guru be so regarded, the goal will be reached soon.'

The point of the second half of the *Anubandham* verse thus becomes clear. One goes to a Guru for liberation – something that is unattainable even from the gods – but if one has the belief or attitude that he is one's equal, or just an ordinary person, one is unlikely to receive it.

Having a strong conviction that one's Guru is God Himself can help one to retain, as well as gain, an experience of the Self. This was brought home to me a few years ago when I interviewed Sharad Tiwari, a devotee of Papaji who had had an experience of the Self within a few days of meeting him in the 1970s. When I spoke to him in the mid-90s, about twenty years after the experience had happened, he told me that the experience had never left him. I have met many people who claim to have had a direct experience of the Self in Papaji's presence, but the vast majority of them seem to lose the experience later. When I interviewed him in 1996, I asked Sharad why other people were losing the experience whereas he had managed to keep it.

David: Papaji shows people who they are. Sometimes, though, he says that it is up to the person concerned to recognise it and not throw it away. From what you have told me, in your case the experience never went away. Why do some people like you stay in that state while others appear to go back to their limited viewpoint again?

Sharad: Anyone who recognises Papaji as God and who never wavers in his conviction that Papaji is God will keep the experience naturally and effortlessly. That is my firm conviction.

When the glimpse comes, it is God revealing Himself as God within you. If you treat Papaji as God, and if you treat the experience he has given you as an experience of His divine nature, it will never go away. If you allow the ego to arise again and cover up the experience, it means that you have thrown away your previous knowledge that Papaji is God, along with your belief that the experience he gave you is God Himself shining within you. It all comes down to having the right attitude.

David: How do you yourself hold onto the absolute conviction that Papaji is God? Is it through awareness of his form, his formlessness, or a combination of both?

Sharad: There is no difference between form and the formless. Form itself is formless and the formless is the form. To know Papaji as God is to know that there is no difference between the two.(14)

Later in the interview Sharad, who is something of a mystic visionary, told me, 'Quite often I see the gods dancing around him

in mid-air, paying obeisance to him. When I see the gods themselves bowing before him with my own eyes, how can I doubt that I am in the presence of the Supreme Lord?’

This injunction in the *Anubandham* verse that of not displaying *advaita* towards the Guru seems to apply even after full liberation, when both Guru and disciple, abiding in the natural state, effortlessly know and experience the truth of the non-dual Self. Bhagavan used a colourful but apt image to convey this. He said that even though a Hindu wife may have enjoyed sexual union with her husband, in public she will still show him deference and respect.

Formal respect is only for external show. When the husband and the wife are in bed, where is all this [formal respect]?(15)

The habit by disciples of worshipping their Guru, who has taken them as His own, is, if pondered over, only observed as an outward formality, just like a wife’s habit of outwardly observing proper reverence towards her husband while in company.(16)

Extending this analogy into the spiritual realm, the disciple may have attained oneness with his or her Guru, but the behaviour he or she exhibits is always reverent and deferential. This is what Sadhu Om has to say on this point in his commentary on this verse:

When the *Sadguru* has destroyed the *ajnana* that is his disciple’s individual consciousness; when he has graciously bestowed upon him the experience of non-duality; and when he has made him one with himself in the state where duality is no more; even then, such a disciple will always serve his *Sadguru* and show for him a fitting respect, and will continue to venerate his name and form. Although, in an inner sense, it is not possible to show a reverence that is dualistic in the state of oneness where duality is not present, still, that disciple will show respect outwardly, just as a wife acts respectfully toward her husband.

... as long as the Guru and disciple appear in the perceptions of others as separate individuals, possessing individual minds and bodies, it will always appear to others that they are, in reality, separate from each other. Therefore, even when this perfected disciple who knows reality attains the non-dual state in which, in his Heart, he and his Guru are one, he will always conduct himself in a subservient and deferential manner toward his *Sadguru*, such that other disciples, taking him as an example, will follow him and behave in a fitting manner.
(17)

I have found this to be true with all the great teachers and enlightened beings I have been associated with. Nisargadatta Maharaj, for example, did an elaborate Guru *puja* every day of his life, long after he had realised the Self. One morning, just before he started, he paused to give an explanation of this daily ritual.

‘I don’t need to do this at all. There is nothing that I can gain from it because I know who and what I am, and what I am cannot be added to in any way. My Guru asked me to do *bhajans* and *puja* every day, and even though I no longer use them to attain a spiritual goal, I will continue to do them until the day I die because

my Guru asked me to do them. In carrying out these orders I can show not only my respect for his words but also my continuous, undiminishing gratitude to the one who gave me the knowledge of who I really am.’

Muruganar wrote thousands of verses in which he thanked Bhagavan for bestowing the state of liberation on him, but he still did elaborate full-length prostrations whenever he came into Bhagavan’s presence. Sometimes he would remain lying on the floor after his *namaskaram* was completed and talk to Bhagavan while he was still prostrate at his feet. Viswanatha Swami used to make fun of Muruganar for this, calling the resulting conversations ‘lizard talk’.(18)

Once, while I was sitting with Papaji, someone asked him if he had any regrets about his life. At first he answered ‘no,’ but after a few seconds’ reflection he added, ‘Actually, I do have one regret. Because my legs are now almost paralysed, I can no longer throw myself full length on the floor at the feet of my Master.’ In his later years he had to be content with a standing ‘*namaste*’ whenever he wanted to pay his respects to Bhagavan’s image.

And what about Bhagavan himself? His respect and veneration towards Arunachala, his Guru, were legendary. However, I will just mention one interesting point. When he composed his philosophical works such as *Upadesa Undiyar* and *Ulladu Narpadu*, his tone was non-dualistic. The verses were an uncompromising expression of what the *Anubandham* verse calls ‘*advaita* within the Heart’. However, when Bhagavan wrote about his Guru, Arunachala, in his devotional poems, he often adopted the pose of the loving, grateful devotee, a standpoint that enabled him show proper respect and veneration to the form and power of the mountain.

One final story about Bhagavan: when Arunachaleswara (the God Arunachala who is the principal deity in the Tiruvannamalai temple) was being taken in procession around the hill in the 1940s, it stopped outside the gate of Sri Ramanasramam. Bhagavan noticed it as he was taking a walk to the cowshed. He sat on a bench to watch, and when devotees brought him *vibhuti* as *prasad*, he applied it reverently to his forehead and remarked, ‘The son is beholden to the father’.(19)

(1) *The Collected Works of Sri Ramana Maharshi*, tr. by Prof K. Swaminathan.

(2) *Living by the Words of Bhagavan*, 2nd ed. p. 99.

(3) *Sri Ramanopadesa Nul Malai Vilakkavurai*, p. 314, 1987 ed.

(4) *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 458.

(5) *Living by the Words of Bhagavan*, pp. 216-7, 2nd ed.

(6) *Sri Ramanopadesa Nul Malai Vilakkavurai*, pp. 314-15, 1987 ed.

(7) *Ulladu Narpadu*, p. 162, 1979 ed.

(8) *Maha Yoga*, pp. 175-6, 2002 ed.

(9) This is a comment by Lakshman Sarma that he appended to verse 416 of *Sri Ramana Paravidyopanishad*. This particular verse was a translation of *Ulladu Narpadu Anubandham*, verse 39. The full text and Lakshman Sarma’s commentary on it can be found at [Sri Ramana Paravidyopanishad](#).

(10) *Sri Ramanopadesa Nul Malai Vilakkavurai*, p. 315, 1987 ed.

(11) Unpublished translation by Sadhu Om and Michael James.

(12) Unpublished translation of Muruganar’s Tamil commentary on *Guru Vachaka Kovai* by Sadhu Om and Michael James. Though this work has not appeared in book form in English, it can be found at [Guru Vachaka Kovai](#).

(13) *Sri Ramana Paravidyopanishad*, verses 25 and 237.

(14) *Nothing Ever Happened*, volume three, pp. 127-8.

(15) *Sri Ramana Pada Malai*, by Sivaprakasam Pillai, cited in *The Power of the Presence*, part one, p. 63.

(16) *Guru Vachaka Kovai*, verse 304, unpublished translation by Sadhu Om and

Michael James.

(17) *Sri Ramanopadesa Nul Malai Vilakkavurai*, pp. 315, 1987 ed.

(18) *Moments Remembered*, pp. 56-7.

(19) *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, 21st November, 1945.

Bhagavan and Thayumanavar

Robert Butler, T. V. Venkatasubramanian and David Godman

Thayumanavar was a distinguished Tamil poet-saint who lived in the first half of the eighteenth century, from 1705 to 1742 AD. His devotional poetry was frequently cited by Bhagavan, with obvious approval, and many Ramanasramam books record fragments of his poems that Bhagavan either read out or quoted from memory. However, in most cases the full verse is not given in the ashram literature. In this article we are presenting the complete versions of most the verses that Bhagavan referred to, giving, wherever possible, the circumstances and context in which they were quoted. We do not propose to analyse Thayumanavar's poetry or philosophy in any great detail; we merely wish to present, in a full form, those portions of his work that particularly appealed to Bhagavan.



[Bhagavan and Thayumanavar](#)

Upadesa Undiyar

Upadesa Undiyar is a thirty-verse philosophical poem composed by Ramana Maharshi in 1927. The original was in Tamil, but Bhagavan later wrote other versions in Telugu, Sanskrit and Malayalam.

Sadhu Om and [Michael James](#) made a word-for-word translation of the Tamil text in the 1980s and added a long introduction and a commentary on each verse. This work ([Upadesa Undiyar of Bhagavan Sri Ramana](#)) was published by Sri Ramana Kshetra but it has been out of print for many years. Since it is not likely to be published again in the near future, I sought and received Michael's permission to post the whole work on this site.

Bhagavan, Manikkavachagar and the *Tiruvachakam*

Manikkavachagar was a distinguished Tamil poet-saint who lived around the ninth century AD. His most famous work, the *Tiruvachakam*, is one of the most loved and most widely read works in Tamil literature. In a series of long poems Manikkavachagar sings of his ecstatic love for Siva and describes the various emotional traumas he went through while pursuing this passionate obsession with the divine.

The *Tiruvachakam* was one of Ramana Maharshi's favourite devotional works. In this article we have retold Manikkavachagar's life, mostly through Bhagavan's own words, and we have made new translations of all the *Tiruvachakam* poems that Bhagavan loved or frequently referred to.



[Bhagavan, Manikkavachagar and the *Tiruvachakam*](#)

Upadesa Tiruvahaval

Muruganar composed most of *Sri Ramana Sannidhi Murai*, a work that praises Bhagavan in a series of long poems, in the late 1920s and early 1930s. ‘Upadesa Tiruvahaval’, the ninth poem of this sequence, is a single continuous verse of just under 200 lines in which Muruganar includes both the story of how he came to Bhagavan and many key teachings that Bhagavan gave him. The translation and the annotations are the work of Robert Butler, T. V. Venkatasubramanian and David Godman. The line numbers of the original poem appear above the translation.



[Upadesa Tiruvahaval](#)

Extracts from *Guru Vachaka Kovai*

A few days ago I made a selection of verses from *Guru Vachaka Kovai* and sent them out to a few of my friends as a Guru Purnima offering. *Guru Vachaka Kovai* is a Tamil work that contains over 1,200 sayings of Ramana Maharshi that were recorded in Tamil verse by Muruganar. The three of us who translated and edited *Padamalai* (myself, T. V. Venkatasubramanian and Robert Butler) are making a new translation of *Guru Vachaka Kovai* which we hope will be completed sometime next year. Here, meanwhile, are some of the verses we have already completed.

[Selected Verses on the Guru from *Guru Vachaka Kovai*](#) (PDF)

Bhagavan's role in the editing of *Guru Vachaka Kovai*

The three of us who translated *Padamalai* (T. V. Venkatasubramanian, Robert Butler and myself) have spent the last three years working on a new translation of *Guru Vachaka Kovai*, Muruganar's collection of Ramana Maharshi's teachings that he recorded in Tamil during the last twenty-five years of Bhagavan's life. We hope that it will be in print in a few months' time.

Bhagavan showed a great interest in this work and made extensive revisions to it. In this article, which will appear in the October 2007 edition of *The Mountain Path*, I have discussed the origin of the work and given many instances of how Bhagavan's editing and revisions changed the meaning of some of the verses.

This article is a much abbreviated version of the introduction that I wrote for our new edition of *Guru Vachaka Kovai*. All the verses that appear in it have been taken from our new translation.

[Guru Vachaka Kovai - Article for Mountain Path](#)



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ARUNACHALA SAINTS



'All stones in that place [Arunachala] are lingams. It is indeed the Abode of Lord Siva. All trees are the wish-granting trees of Indra's heaven. Its rippling waters are the Ganges, flowing through our Lord's matted locks. The food eaten there is the ambrosia of the Gods. When men move about in that place it is the earth performing pradakshina around it. Words spoken there are holy scripture, and to fall asleep there is to be absorbed in samadhi, beyond the mind's delusion. Could there be any other place which is its equal?'

- Arunachala Puranam

This section contains biographies and writings of great saints who have been associated with Arunachala in the last few centuries. If this is all new to you, I suggest you read in the following order: The Power of Arunachala, Guhai Namasivaya, Arunagiri Malai, Arunagiri Antadi, Guru Namasivaya, Annamalai Venba, Arunagirinatha, Kandar Anubhuti, Perutta Vachanam, King Vallalan, Isanya Desikar, Garland of Hymns to Arunachala.

The Power of Arunachala

(First published in *The Mountain Path*, 1982, pp. 75-84.)

By [Michael James](#)

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The Thought of Arunachala

By seeing Chidambaram, by being born, in Tiruvarur, by dying in Kasi, or by merely thinking of Arunachala, one will surely attain Liberation.

The supreme knowledge (Self-knowledge), the import of Vedanta, which cannot be attained without great difficulty, can easily be attained by anyone who sees the form of this hill from wherever it is visible or who even thinks of it by mind from afar.[\(1\)](#)

Such is the assurance given by Lord Siva in the *Arunachala Mahatmyam* about the power of the mere thought of Arunachala, and this assurance has received striking confirmation from the life and teachings of Bhagavan Sri Ramana.

In the second line of the first verse of *Sri Arunachala Ashtakam* Sri Bhagavan tells us that from his very earliest childhood, when he knew no other thing, Arunachala was shining his mind as the 'most great'. And this thought of Arunachala so worked in his mind that at the age of sixteen a great fear of death arose in him and turned his mind Selfwards to drown forever in its source.

In his writings Sri Bhagavan has repeatedly confirmed the mysterious power that the thought of Arunachala has over the mind. In his Tamil *Collected Works*, under the picture of Arunachala, there is a verse that can be considered as his *dhyana sloka* (verse of contemplation) upon his *Sadguru*, Arunachala Siva.

In this verse he sings, 'This is Arunachala-Siva, the ocean of grace that bestows liberation when thought of'.

In the first verse of *Sri Arunachala Aksharamanamalai* (*The Marital Garland of Letters*) he sings, 'O Arunachala, you root out the ego of those who think of you in the heart as "Arunachala"'.

In the 102nd verse of *Aksharamanamalai*, he sings, 'O Arunachala, the moment I thought of Arunai [the holy town of Arunachala] I was caught in the trap of your grace. Can the net of your grace ever fail?'

And in the last line of the second verse of *Sri Arunachala Navamanimalai* (*The Necklet of Nine Gems*) he sings, '*Mukti Ninaikka varul Arunachalam*,' meaning, 'Arunachala, the mere thought of which bestows liberation'.

But only in the tenth verse of *Sri Arunachala Patikam* does Sri Bhagavan actually reveal how the thought of Arunachala works in the mind to root out the ego. In this verse he sings:

I have seen a wonder, a magnetic hill that forcibly attracts the soul. Arresting the activities of the soul who thinks of it even once, drawing it to face itself, the One, making it thus motionless like itself, it feeds upon that sweet [pure and ripened] soul. What a wonder is this! O souls, be saved by thinking of this great Arunagiri, which shines in the mind as the destroyer of the soul [the ego].

The words '*oru tanadu abhimukhamaha irttu*,' 'drawing it to face itself, the One,' used here by Sri Bhagavan are a mystic way of saying 'drawing the soul to turn inwards and face Self, the one reality'. Thus in this verse Sri Bhagavan reveals how the thought of Arunachala works within the mind to arrest its activities, to attract its attention towards Self and thereby to make it still. In other words, Sri Bhagavan assures that the thought of Arunachala will lead the mind to the path of Self-enquiry, the 'direct path for all', as indeed happened in his own case.

Knowing from personal experience this unique power of Arunachala, Sri Bhagavan confidently advises us in the last line of this verse, 'O souls, be saved by thinking of this great Arunagiri, which shines in the mind as the destroyer of the soul!'

The Form of Arunachala

Sri Bhagavan has said that Arunachala is the supreme Self that shines as 'I' in the hearts of all living beings. In other words, Arunachala is truly the non-dual reality that transcends time, space, name and form. Hence, many of the verses in *The Five Hymns to Arunachala*, being very mystic in nature, can well be interpreted as applying to the nameless and formless Self, rather than to the name and form of Arunachala. For this reason, some devotees tend to view Sri Bhagavan's revelation about the power of Arunachala as being purely allegorical, and a few even ask, 'When Arunachala is the Self, why should we attach any particular importance to this hill'.⁽²⁾

In order to understand more fully the importance that Sri Bhagavan attached to the name and form of this hill, it is necessary for us to take a broad view of his teachings. In verse four of *Ulladu Narpadu* (*The Forty Verses on Reality*) Sri Bhagavan says, 'If oneself is a form, the world and God will also be likewise'. That is, they will also be forms. In the first line of the third verse of *Sri Arunachala Ashtakam* he addresses Arunachala and sings, 'When I approach you, regarding you as having form, you stand here as a hill on earth'.

That is, so long as we identify the body as 'I', it is equally true that this hill is God. Indeed, Sri Bhagavan used to say that because we identify the body as 'I', Lord Siva, the Supreme Reality, out of his immense compassion for us, identifies this hill as 'I', so that we may see him, think of him and thereby receive his grace and guidance. 'Only to reveal your [transcendent] state without speech [i.e. through silence], you stand as a hill shining from earth to sky,' sings Sri Bhagavan in the last line of the second verse of *Sri*

Arunachala Ashtakam.

So long as we feel the name and form of our body to be 'I', we cannot conceive God as being anything but a name and form. Even if we think that God is formless, that very thought about God itself is a form - a mere mental conception. This is why Sri Bhagavan says in the second line of the third verse of *Ashtakam*, 'If one tries to think of your nature as formless, he is like one who wanders throughout the world to see the sky'.⁽³⁾

Being the perfect spiritual Master that he was, Sri Bhagavan knew well how important and necessary is the form of God for the human mind, which is ever attached to forms. And from his own personal experience he knew the unique power of the form of Arunachala, a power that cannot be found in such abundance in any other form of God, namely the power to turn the mind towards Self and thereby to root out the ego.

In verse eleven of *Sri Arunachala Patikam* Sri Bhagavan exclaims with joy and wonder, 'Lo! How many are there like me who have been destroyed by thinking this hill to be the Supreme', thereby assuring us that if we regard this hill as God, our egos will surely be destroyed. Though Arunachala appears outwardly as a hill of mere insentient rock, the true devotee understands it to be the all-knowing, all-loving and all-powerful Supreme Lord, who is guiding him both from within and without at every step and turn of life, leading him steadily and surely towards the goal of egolessness. 'What a wonder! It stands as if an insentient hill [yet] its action is mysterious - impossible for anyone to understand,' sings Sri Bhagavan in the first line of *Sri Arunachala Ashtakam*.

The Name of Arunachala

Of all the names of God, the name dearest to the heart of Sri Bhagavan was Arunachala. Every one of the 108 verses of *Sri Arunachala Aksharamanamalai* ends with the name Arunachala, and the refrain is 'Arunachala Siva, Arunachala Siva, Arunachala Siva, Arunachala Siva, Arunachala!' From the great love that Sri Bhagavan had for this name, it is clear that he regarded it as being no less powerful than the form of Arunachala. This fact is confirmed in verse seventy of *Aksharamanamalai* in which Sri Bhagavan sings, 'O Arunachala, the very moment I thought of your name, you caught me and drew me to yourself. Who can understand your greatness?'

There are many incidents in the life of Sri Bhagavan that illustrate his great love for the divine name Arunachala, but perhaps the most striking occurred during his last moments. About twenty-five minutes before he left his body, the assembled devotees began to chant *Aksharamanamalai*. Hearing the name of his beloved Arunachala, Sri Bhagavan opened his eyes, which shone with love, and tears of ecstasy rolled down his cheeks.

Though Sri Bhagavan never gave mantra *diksha* nor formally accepted anyone as his disciple, many devotees believe that Arunachala is the *nama*-mantra that he has bestowed upon the whole world. When a Guru formally gives a mantra to his disciple, he explains to him the meaning and significance of each letter of the mantra and tells him the fruit to be gained by meditating upon that mantra. In the same manner, in the second verse of *Sri Arunachala Navamanimalai* Sri Bhagavan has explained the meaning of each syllable in the name Arunachala and he has declared that mere thought of this name will bestow liberation. From this we can infer that Arunachala is the *jnana-panchakshari*,

the five-syllable mantra that bestows *jnana*. Moreover, tradition tells us that when a mantra is given by a *jnani* and when he explains the significance of each syllable of that mantra, he is actually putting his own power into that mantra. Therefore, if any devotees of Sri Bhagavan wish to have a mantra, they can very well, take Arunachala to be the mantra openly given to them by him.

The power of the name Arunachala was once directly confirmed by Sri Bhagavan. In 1948 a certain devotee came to him from Bombay, and with him he brought a notebook in which he had written the name 'Arunachala Siva' many thousands of times. On the last page of this notebook the devotee wrote a prayer to the following effect, 'O Bhagavan, in the life of Sarada Devi [the wife of Sri Ramakrishna] it is written that she has said that if even an animal dies in Kasi it will attain liberation. Therefore, graciously bestow upon be the boon of death in Kasi.' and gave the notebook to Sri Bhagavan.

Bhagavan looked through the notebook and when he came to the last page he read out loud the devotee's prayer: at once he expressed the greatest surprise and exclaimed, '*Smaranat Arunachalam!*'

The words '*Smaranat Arunachalam*' mean 'by remembering Arunachala', and they occur in the very same Sanskrit verse that says that by dying in Kasi one will attain liberation. Bhagavan then turned to the revolving bookcase by his side and took out a book, probably the *Arunachala Mahatmyam*. Opening it as if at random, he read out a sentence in Tamil that said, 'One "Arunachala" is equal power to one crore "*Om Nama Sivaya*"'.

'Om Nama Sivaya' is believed by Saivas all over India to be the most sacred and powerful *mantra*. After reading out a few other portions of this book that emphasized the unique greatness and power of Arunachala, Sri Bhagavan finally laid it aside and explained to the devotee that not everyone can see Chidambaram, not everyone can be born in Tiruvarur, and not everyone can die in Kasi, but anyone and everyone can think of Arunachala from wherever they may be, and thereby they will surely attain liberation.

From this incident we can understand how unhesitatingly Sri Bhagavan encouraged devotees to have absolute faith in Arunachala. If devotees of a sceptical frame of mind came to him and asked him how mere thought of Arunachala could bestow liberation, he used to explain the allegorical significance of this saying, since that alone would satisfy their mind.⁽⁴⁾ But if devotees came to him with simple, child-like faith, he would strengthen their faith and confirm the literal meaning of this saying, since he knew from personal experience the great power of the name and form of Arunachala.

The Unique Sanctity of Arunachala

In India there are countless holy places (*kshetras*) that are sacred to Lord Siva or to some other name and form of God, and many of them are more well-known and popular than Arunachala. Yet there is a verse in the *Arunachala Mahatmyam*, which has been selected and translated into Tamil by Sri Bhagavan, that says:

Arunachala is truly the holy place. Of all holy places it is the most sacred! Know that it is the heart of the world. It is truly Siva himself! It is his heart-abode, a secret *kshetra*. In that place the Lord ever abides the hill of light named Arunachala.

Whenever Sri Bhagavan asked about the special sanctity of Arunachala, he used to explain that other holy places such as Kailas, Kasi and Chidambaram are sacred because they are the abodes of Lord Siva whereas Arunachala is Lord Siva himself.(5) However, as the above verse of *Arunachala Mahatmyam* says, Arunachala is a secret *kshetra*. Because it is this place that bestows *jnana* and because most people have so many other desires and do not truly want *jnana*, Arunachala has always remained comparatively little known. But to those few who seek *jnana*, Arunachala always makes itself known through some means or other.

The unique sanctity and power of Arunachala-*kshetra* was once confirmed by an incident that happened in the life of Sri Bhagavan. Because of his great love for Sri Bhagavan, a certain devotee wanted to take him to his native place, Chidambaram. But rather than directly ask Sri Bhagavan to come to Chidambaram, he began to ask him if he had ever been to see Lord Nataraja in Chidambaram Temple. When Sri Bhagavan replied that he had not, the devotee began to describe the greatness of Chidambaram, saying that it was the most sacred Siva-*kshetra* in South India, that so many saints and sages had lived there and had sung in praise of Lord Nataraja, and so on and so forth. Sri Bhagavan listened to all he said with patient interest, but showed no signs of wanting to visit Chidambaram.

Seeing this, the devotee at last said, 'Chidambaram is even greater than Arunachala, because among the *panchabuta lingams* [the *lingams* representing the five elements] Chidambaram is the space-*lingam* while Arunachala is only the fire-*lingam*.(6) Since the four elements, earth, water, air and fire, finally have to merge in space, space is the principal element.'

Hearing this, Sri Bhagavan smiled and said, 'All the five elements come into existence only when Sakti seemingly forsakes her identify with Lord Siva, the Supreme Self (*Paramatman*). Since the five elements are thus only the creations of Sakti, she is superior to all of them. Therefore, more important than the place where the elements merge, is the place where Sakti herself merges. Because Sakti is dancing in Chidambaram, Lord Siva has to dance before her and thereby make her become motionless. But in Arunachala Lord Siva remains ever motionless (*achala*), and hence Sakti automatically and effortlessly merges in him through great love. Therefore, Arunachala shines as the foremost and most powerful *kshetra*, because here Sakti, who has seemingly created all this manifold appearance, herself merges into the Lord. So for those mature aspirants who seek to put an end to the false appearance of duality, the most powerful help is to be found only in Arunachala-*kshetra*.'

Subsequently, on 24th June 1928, Sri Bhagavan summarized this reply of his in the form of a verse, which later became the first verse of *Sri Arunachala Navamanimalai*. In this verse he says:

Though he is truly motionless by nature, in the court [of Chidambaram] Lord Siva dances before Sakti, thereby making her motionless. But know that [in Tiruvannamalai] Lord Arunachala shines triumphant, that Sakti having merged in his motionless form.

Next: [Sri Bhagavan has clearly indicated that the role of Arunachala is the role of the Sadguru](#)

- (1) This verse is the fifth of the seven verses that Sri Bhagavan selected from the *Arunachala Mahatmyam* and translated into Tamil.
- (2) In *Talks*, talk no. 273, it is recorded that Dr Syed once asked a similar question to Sri Bhagavan, who in reply pointed out that the hill had attracted to itself all the assembled devotees, including Sri Bhagavan himself, and that the power of the hill therefore could not be denied.
- (3) The futility of trying to conceive God as being formless when we are unable to know ourself as the formless Self, is well illustrated by a dialogue that Sri Bhagavan once had with some Muslims, which is recorded on p. 28 of *Maha Yoga* and in *Talks*, talk no. 121.
- (4) An example of how Sri Bhagavan used to give this type of explanation can be found in *Talks* no. 473 (p. 448).
- (5) See similar comments recorded in *Talks*, talk no. 143, and *Sri Ramana Reminiscences*, p. 37.
- (6) Though Arunachala is generally considered to be one of the *panchabhuta-lingams*, Sri Bhagavan used to point out that It is truly not a *lingam* of ordinary fire, which is one among the five gross elements, but is a lingam of the fire of knowledge (*jnanagni*), the fire that burns the ego to destruction.

The Power of Arunachala

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The Gurutvam of Arunachala

Arunachala has always been renowned as the bestower of liberation, the destroyer of the ego, the remover of the false notion 'I am the body' - as the *jnana*-Guru par excellence.

When Brahma and Vishnu began to quarrel, being deluded by pride and egoism, Lord Arunachala Siva appeared before them in the form of a column of fire, thereby vanquishing their egoism and teaching them true knowledge. When Sakti, Goddess Parvati, wished to attain a state in which she could do no wrong, Lord Siva sent her to Arunachala, where she merged and became one with him. Thus, even to Brahma and Vishnu, Arunachala was Guru, and to Parvati it was the place where she lost her separate individuality.

Throughout the ages saints and sages have sung verses in Sanskrit, Tamil and other Indian languages extolling the unique power of Arunachala to root out the ego and to bestow Self-knowledge. All the four great Saiva sages of Tamil Nadu, Manikkavachagar, Sundaramurti, Appar and Jnanasambandhar, have sung in praise of Arunachala. In one verse often pointed out by Sri Bhagavan, Jnanasambandhar described this hill as being *jnana-tiral*, a dense mass of *jnana*. And Sundaramurti, singing in *Tiruvanaikka*, remembers Arunachala and sings, 'O Annamalai, you can be known only to those who give up the attachment to the body'.

These puranic stories and songs of ancient sages all confirm the fact that Arunachala is the supreme *jnana*-Guru. But this fact has received its most striking confirmation from Sri Bhagavan. In verse nineteen of *Aksharamanamalai* he explicitly states that Arunachala shines as the form of his Guru; and in the same verse he reveals the function of the real Guru, namely to destroy all our defects, including the root-defect, the ego, to bestow all good qualities upon us and to rule over us.

In many of his other verses Sri Bhagavan has clearly indicated that the role of Arunachala is the role of the *Sadguru*. For example, in *Aksharamanamalai* he sings that Arunachala roots out the ego of those who think of it (verse 1), that it annihilates those who approach it as God (verse 48) and that it destroys the attachment of those who come to it with attachment (verse 77). He also reveals

that Arunachala instructs through silence (verse 36) and that it teaches the path of self-enquiry (verse 44); and he shows us the way of praying to Arunachala to bestow *jnana* (verse 40) to reveal Self as the reality (verse 43) and to make us give up the attachment to the body (verse 75). He has also confirmed from his own experience the power of Arunachala as Guru. In verse eight of *Sri Arunachala Navamanimalai* he sings that, in order to put an end to his sufferings in the world, Arunachala 'gave me his own state'; and in verse nine he describes the wonder of Arunachala's grace saying, 'You entered my mind, drew me and established me in your own state'.

All that Sri Bhagavan has said about the power of Arunachala tallies exactly with what he has said about the power of the Guru. In verse 268 of *Guru Vachaka Kovai (The Garland of Guru's Sayings)* he says that the Guru is he who possesses the supreme power to make any soul who comes to him merge into Self, the knowledge beyond all speech. The Guru works in many ways to make the disciple merge into Self. 'He gives a push from "without" and exerts a pull from "within", so that you may be fixed in the Centre,' says Sri Bhagavan in *Maharshi's Gospel*, p. 36. From 'without' the Guru gives verbal instructions to turn the disciple's mind towards Self, and he also enables the disciple to have association (*satsang*) with his form, and thereby to gain the necessary strength and love to turn within and attend to Self. To give verbal instructions it is necessary for the Guru to be in human form, but to give *satsang* and subtle inner guidance he may be in any form.

Sri Bhagavan has come as the Guru in human form to give us all the necessary verbal instructions, and he has revealed that Arunachala is the Guru in the form of a hill with which we can always have *satsang*. Like any human body, the human form of the Guru will inevitably pass away one day, whereas the form of Arunachala will always remain. Thus, though Sri Bhagavan has left his human form, he has provided us with all the requisite outward help: he has left us with a permanent record of his verbal teachings, and he has shown us a form with which we can always have *satsang*. Therefore, for the devotees of Sri Bhagavan there will never be any need to search for another outer Guru, because all the necessary help and guidance is ever available for us in the form of the teachings of Sri Bhagavan and the *satsang* of Arunachala.

The power of the *satsang* of Arunachala was often confirmed by Sri Bhagavan. Dr. T. N. Krishnaswamy records in the *Ramana Pictorial Souvenir*, p. 7 that Sri Bhagavan once said to him:

The whole hill is sacred. It is Siva himself. Just as we identify ourselves with a body, so Siva has chosen to identify himself with his hill. Arunachala is pure wisdom (*jnana*) in the form of a hill. It is out of compassion to those who seek him that he has chosen to reveal himself in the form of a hill visible to the eye. The seeker will obtain guidance and solace by staying near this hill.

Arunachala-pradakshina

Arunachala is the physical embodiment of *Sat*, the reality, and hence to have contact with it in any manner is *satsang*. To think of Arunachala is *satsang*, to see Arunachala is *satsang*, and to live near Arunachala is *satsang*. But one very special way of having *satsang* with Arunachala is to do Arunagiri-pradakshina, that it is,

to walk barefoot round the hill keeping it to one's right-side.

The great importance that Sri Bhagavan attached to *giri-pradakshina* is well known to all the devotees who lived with him. He himself did *pradakshina* countless times, and he actively and spontaneously encouraged devotees to follow his example.

'Bhagavan, who scarcely ever gave advice to devotees unless asked, wholeheartedly encouraged their going round the hill as conducive to progress in *sadhana*,' writes Lucia Osborne in *The Mountain Path*, January 1974, p. 3.

Devaraja Mudaliar records that the importance of *pradakshina* became evident to him 'from the frequent references by Bhagavan himself to its great significance, and from the fact that thousands of people do it, including almost all the close disciples of Bhagavan, even those who may be considered the most advanced among them.' (*My Recollections of Bhagavan Sri Ramana*, p. 64)

Though comparatively little has been recorded of what Sri Bhagavan used to say about the power of *pradakshina*, there is no doubt that he considered it to be an act having great spiritual efficacy. In fact he used to say that the benefits which can be gained by meditation and various other forms of mind-control only after great struggle and effort, will be effortlessly gained by those who go round the hill.

'Bhagavan often said that those unable to meditate would succeed in their endeavour by circumambulating Arunachala,' writes Suri Nagamma in *My Life at Sri Ramanasramam*, p. 144.

Kunju Swami records on p. 108 of *Enadu Ninaivugal* that Bhagavan once told him. 'What is better than *pradakshina*? That alone is sufficient.'

While extolling the spiritual efficacy of *pradakshina*, Sri Bhagavan sometimes used to narrate the story of King Vajrangada Pandya, which is told in the *Arunachala Mahatmyam*. Vajrangada Pandya was a powerful monarch who ruled over most of South India, but one day he was told by some celestial beings that in this previous birth he had been Indra, the ruler of heaven, and that if he worshipped Arunachala he could regain his former position. On hearing this, he at once renounced his kingdom and, with the intense desire to become Indra, he began to worship Arunachala by going around the hill three times a day. After three years of such worship, Lord Siva appeared before him and offered him any boon he wished to pray for. Though his original ambition had been to become Indra, his mind had been matured by doing so many *pradakshinas*, he now realized that it was worthless to pray for such a transitory pleasure. He therefore prayed to Lord Siva for the eternal happiness of Self-knowledge. This story thus aptly illustrates that even if a person begins to do *pradakshina* for the fulfillment of worldly desires, his mind will in time be matured and he will gain proper discrimination (*viveka*), desirelessness (*vairagya*) and love for Self (*swatma-bhakti*).

Generally, whenever sages or scriptures prescribe any form of dualistic worship, whether for the fulfillment of worldly desires or for the attainment of Self-knowledge, they always say that it must be done with faith. But Sri Bhagavan used to say that the power of Arunachala is such that even if one does *pradakshina* with no faith, it will still have its effect and will surely purify the mind. Devaraja Mudaliar records on p. 64 of *My Recollections* that Sri Bhagavan told him, 'For everybody it is good to make circuit of the hill. It

does not even matter whether one has faith in this *pradakshina* or not; just as fire will burn all who touch it whether they believe in it or not, so the hill will do good to all those who go round it.'

Because Arunachala is the 'fire of knowledge' (*jnanagni*) in the form of a hill, the outgoing tendencies (*vasanas*) of the mind are automatically scorched when one goes round it. When damp wood is brought close to a fire, it will gradually be dried, and at a certain point it will itself catch fire. Similarly, when the mind which is soaked with worldly tendencies goes round the hill, the tendencies will gradually dry up and at a certain point the mind will become fit to be burnt by the fire of *jnana*. That is why Sri Bhagavan said to Kunju Swami, 'This hill is the storehouse of all spiritual power. Going round It benefits you in all ways'. (*The Mountain Path*, April 1979, p. 75)

The spiritual benefits of *pradakshina* have been described by Sri Sadhu Om in one of his Tamil poems, *Sri Arunachala Pradakshina Manbu*. In verses six and seven he says, 'A cow grazing round and round its peg, does not know that the length of its rope is thereby decreasing. Similarly, when you go round and round Arunachala, how can your mind know that it is thereby subsiding? When the cow goes round more and more, at one point it will be bound tightly to its peg. Similarly when the mind lovingly goes more and more round Annamalai [Arunachala], which is Self, it will finally stand still in Self-abidance, having lost all its movements [*vruttis*].'

In verse eight he says, 'It is a well-proven truth that the minds of those devotees who ever go round Annamalai achieve great love to turn within towards Self. Annamalai is the blazing, wild hill of fire [the fire of *Jnana*] that burns all our worldly desires into ashes.' And in verse nine he gives the simile of a piece of iron being rubbed against a magnet; just as the scattered atoms of iron are all aligned by the magnet to face in one uniform direction, thereby transforming the iron into a magnet, so when a person goes round Arunachala, the divine magnet, his scattered mind, is turned towards Self and is thereby transformed into Self.

Sri Muruganar, who was a great sage and one of the foremost disciples of Sri Bhagavan, was noted as a staunch lover of *pradakshina*. In the days of Sri Bhagavan he used to write to any friends who were coming to see him, 'You will find me either in Bhagavan's hall or on the *giri-pradakshina* road,' and it is said that at one time he even used to go round the hill daily. How he first came to know about the greatness of *giri-pradakshina* is related by Kunju Swami in *The Mountain Path*, April 1979, p. 83, as follows:

Sometime after he came here, Sri Muruganar asked Bhagavan about the spiritual benefit of going round the hill (*giri-pradakshina*). Bhagavan asked him to go round it first and then come to him. Sri Muruganar followed his advice and told Bhagavan that he lost his *dehatma buddhi* [sense of identification with the body] after a while and regained it only after reaching Adi-Annamalai [a village on the way]. He reported to Sri Bhagavan that the experience was unexpected and unique. Sri Bhagavan smiled and said, 'Do you now understand?'

This incident proves very clearly the power of *pradakshina*, and it shows that mature souls can even lose their sense of identification with the body by going round the hill. It also illustrates what Sri Bhagavan meant when he used to say that while going round the

hill one can experience *sanchara-samadhi*, a thought-free state of bliss while walking.

Though such a thought-free state is not experienced by all devotees when they go round the Hill, that does not mean that their *pradakshina* is not yielding fruit. The main benefit of *pradakshina* is that the tendencies (*vasanas*) are slowly made to lose their grip over the mind, but just as a child cannot easily perceive its own growth, so the mind cannot easily perceive the weakening of its own *vasanas*.

However, one very notable feature about *pradakshina* that can be perceived by anyone and which clearly indicates its spiritual efficacy is the extraordinary power of attraction it exerts over the minds of devotees. For no special reason one feels attracted to go round Arunachala again and again.

'Go round the hill once. You will see that it will attract you,' said Sri Bhagavan to Devaraja Mudaliar (*My Recollections*, p.65).

'Bhagavan used to say that if one went round the hill once or twice, the hill itself would draw one to go round it again. I have found it true. Now this is happening to Dr. Syed,' writes Devaraja Mudaliar in *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 19th December, 1945.

In *Letters from Sri Ramanasramam*, volume 2, letter 98, Suri Nagamma records Sri Bhagavan as saying, 'The *dhyana* [meditation] that you cannot get into while sitting, you get into automatically if you go for *pradakshina*. The place and atmosphere here are like that. However unable a person is to walk, if he once goes round the hill he will feel like going again and again. The more you go, the more the enthusiasm for it. It never decreases. Once a person is accustomed to the happiness of *pradakshina*, he can never give it up.'

Just as the mind is automatically attracted to the Guru, knowing intuitively that he can bestow eternal bliss, for the same reason the mind feels automatically attracted to *giri pradakshina*.

Arunachala-Ramana

To understand the power of Arunachala, it is first necessary to understand the relationship that existed between Arunachala and Bhagavan. To Bhagavan, Arunachala was Mother, Father, Guru and God - it was his all in all, his own Self.

Sri Bhagavan often said, 'God, Guru and Self are one and the same,' and to him Arunachala was all three of these. In verse forty-eight of *Aksharamanamalai* he refers to Arunachala as his God, in verse nineteen as his Guru, and in verse five of *Atma Vidya Kirtanam* (*The Song on the Science of Self*) as 'Annamalai, my Self'.

Truly, Arunachala is Ramana and Ramana is Arunachala. The two are inseparable. Arunachala is Ramana in the form of a hill, and Ramana is Arunachala in human form. The oneness that Sri Bhagavan felt with Arunachala is disclosed in many of his verses.

When a devotee enquired about his true nature, he replied, 'Arunachala-Ramana is the Supreme Self who blissfully abides as consciousness in the heart-cave of all souls beginning with Hari (Lord Vishnu) . '

The same name, 'Arunachala-Ramana', which he used while referring to himself, he also uses while addressing the hill in the last verse of *Aksharamanamalai*, and in verse ninety he calls the hill 'Ramana'. When Sri Bhagavan composed *Sri Arunachala Pancharatnam* (*The Five Gems*) in Sanskrit, a devotee composed a

concluding verse in which he said that these five verses were an *Upanishad* revealed by Srimad Ramana Maharshi. Later, when Sri Bhagavan translated this hymn into Tamil, he adapted this concluding verse and substituted the name '*Arunagiri-Ramana*' for the name 'Srimad Ramana Maharshi', thereby indicating that it was Arunagiri (Arunachala) itself in the form of Ramana who sang this hymn. From all this, it is clear that Sri Bhagavan experienced no individuality or existence of his own separate from Arunachala.

Though Bhagavan Ramana has left his human form, he will always remain shining here in the form of Arunachala, giving guidance and solace to his devotees. Therefore, the power of Arunachala is the power of Ramana - the power of the *Sadguru*'s grace.

O Arunachala, ocean of grace in the form of a hill, bestow grace
upon me!

(*Sri Arunachala Aksharamanamalai*, verse 17)

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Guhai Namasivaya

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Visitors to Virupaksha Cave, the place where Ramana Maharishi spent about fifteen years of his life, may have noticed a small walled compound a few hundred feet lower down the hill. This compound, which one enters through a small *gopuram* on the eastern side, contains a cave that was, several centuries ago, occupied for many years by a yogi called Guhai Namasivaya. The cave and the few buildings that surround it now bear his name.



The gopuram over the entrance to the Guhai Namasivaya Temple

Guhai Namasivaya is known to have been born around the year AD 1548 in Karnataka to a pious Saiva couple. According to his somewhat hagiographical biography, his spiritual nature became evident at an early age: he was virtuous in his conduct, adept at his studies and evinced no attachment to worldly matters. Feeling a great longing to receive the grace of the Lord, he embarked at an early age upon a search that led him to Sivananda Desikar, a famous Guru who lived at Sri Sailam. He became a disciple of this Guru and began to serve him with fervent and selfless devotion.

Sivananda Desikar belonged to the Virasaiva sect. Since Guhai Namasivaya immersed himself in this tradition for many years, a brief account of the beliefs and practices of this sect will throw a little light on the kind of life he led as a young man.

The origin of Virasaivism, an offshoot of Saivism, can be traced back to the twelfth century. Its philosophy has grown out of the twenty-eight Saiva *Agamas* and the writings of its early exponents. Virasaivas are also known as Lingayats on account of the immense importance they attach to their conception of the term '*Linga*'. For them, *Linga* is not merely a physical object, it is synonymous with *chaitanya*, or consciousness, and can be taken to be Siva himself. In their philosophy, the term *Linga* can be equated with the *Parabrahman* of the *Upanishads*, but it has other connotations as well. It is the cosmic principle that is the source of the universe and, in its physical form, it is the visible symbol of the consciousness that exists in all beings. In addition, and this is particularly interesting in view of the years Guhai Namasivaya spent at Arunachala, it is often conceived of as a mass of light or a column of blazing fire. Worship of the *Linga* in all its forms is central to Virasaivism.



*The entrance to
Virupaksha cave*
(Click on image to enlarge)

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Translation of this article
\(PDF\)](#)

The goal of Virasaivas is the attainment of oneness with Siva. To reach this exalted state, Virasaivas believe that one must submit to and serve a Guru who has already attained that oneness. Thus, in the Virasaiva tradition, the Guru is given immense importance, for it is he alone who can initiate the disciple, purify him, and lead him to unity with Siva.

For a devout Virasaiva, the spiritual path begins when he approaches a competent Guru and asks him for initiation. Usually, the Guru will first test him for a year to see how serious his spiritual inclinations are. When the Guru is satisfied that the disciple's desire is genuine, he agrees to initiate him and accept him as a disciple. The initiation given by the Guru activates the power of *Linga* in the three bodies, the causal, the subtle and the gross, and removes some or all of the taints or imperfections that reside in each of the three bodies. Virasaivas believe that these taints, called *mala*, prevent the disciple from becoming established in *Linga*, the Supreme Siva-consciousness.

In the initiation ceremony the Guru first places his right palm on the head of the disciple, thereby awakening the supreme Self in the causal body in a form that is called *Bhavalinga*. Simultaneously, through his power, the Guru attempts to eliminate any impurities that dwell there. Next, the Guru whispers the great mantra '*Nama Sivaya*' in the right ear of the disciple. All Saivas hold this to be the best and most potent mantra. The act of whispering establishes in the subtle body a form or aspect of the *Linga* that is called *Pranalinga*. The power transmitted by this mantra initiation also cleanses the subtle body and removes some of its imperfections. Then, in what is perhaps the most significant part of the ritual, the disciple is given a physical *Linga*. Virasaivas believe the *Linga* is a great light in the innermost heart that can be brought out and shaped into a physical form by the Guru. In the final part of the rite, the Guru draws out the power of *Linga* from the heart of the devotee, establishes it in a physical *Linga*, which is called *Ishtalinga*, presents it to the disciple and commands him to worship it as if were Siva himself. The handing over of the *Ishtalinga* removes the taints that are attached to the physical body.

The Guru then commands the devotee to wear the *Ishtalinga* on his body at all times and to worship it three times a day. The Guru also tells him that the *Linga* must on no account be separated from the body since such a separation is equivalent of spiritual death. In the Virasaiva tradition, it is not permitted to worship Siva in any other form except that of the *Istalinga* or the *Linga* installed over one's Guru's *samadhi*. Virasaivas are therefore forbidden from worshipping forms of Siva that have been installed in temples.

We can assume that Guhai Namasivaya underwent this initiation ceremony since it is a compulsory rite of passage for all Virasaivas. He probably went through it quite early in his life, for it was not uncommon for eight-year-olds to be initiated in this way.

Sivananda Desikar, Guhai Namasivaya's Guru, was an adept in a Virasaiva yoga system known as Siva Yoga. When Sivananada Desikar noticed what a mature disciple Guhai Namasivaya was, he initiated him into its practices. From then on, Guhai Namasivaya alternated his time between physical service to the Guru and the practice of Siva Yoga. In the course of time he too became an

accomplished Siva yogi.

Siva Yoga emphasises *dharana*, *dhyana* and *samadhi*, the last three stages of Patanjali's Raja Yoga system, but it gives them a Virasaiva turn by emphasising meditation on the three *Lingas* that the Guru has established in the three bodies. In the Siva Yoga system, worship of the *Ishtalinga*, the *Linga* given by the Guru to the disciple, is called *dharana*, or uninterrupted concentration; worship of the Pranalinga established in the subtle body is *dhyana*, or meditation; remembrance and awareness of the *Bhavalinga* in the causal body is called *samadhi*. According to Maggeya Mayideva, a Virasaiva saint, '*samadhi* is the action which includes both radiant worship and meditation on one's own *Linga*'.

The yoga practice is performed in the following way: 'Setting *Ishtalinga* firmly in his left palm, restraining the traffic of his other limbs, restraining the movement of breath through breath control, or *pranayama*, controlling the modifications of the mind, focussing his physical eye on *Ishtalinga*, his inner eye on *Pranalinga* and his intuitional eye on *Bhavalinga*, being one with *Linga* and unifying the triple *Linga* into one - he lives his own Self.'⁽¹⁾

The goal of the yoga is to find Siva in everything and to discover the fundamental root of that immanent Siva manifestation in one's heart. Though Siva Yoga has a strong *bhakti* component, it must not be forgotten that it is also a variety of Kundalini Yoga. The Siva yogis aim to make contact with the power of the Lord. They believe that the contact finally takes place after the *prana*, rising through the *sushumna*, has passed through all the six *chakras* and moved on to the *brahmarandhra*, located at the top of the head. Accomplished Siva yogis, at the time of their death, voluntarily send all their *pranas* out of their bodies through this *brahmarandhra* and merge into the all-pervading consciousness of Siva.

Guhai Namasivaya practised this system of yoga for many years. When he had thoroughly mastered it, Lord Mallikarjuna, the presiding deity of Sri Sailam, appeared to Guhai Namasivaya in a dream and commanded him to go to Arunachala and remain there as a Guru, giving teachings to mature disciples who approached him. When he related this dream to his Guru, Sivananada Desikar gave him his blessings and told him to carry out the order. Shortly afterwards, Guhai Namasivaya set out on horseback for Tiruvannamalai.

There is a tradition in Tiruvannamalai that Guhai Namasivaya was accompanied on his journey by Virupaksha Deva, the man who gave his name to Virupaksha Cave. Ramana Maharishi occasionally told his devotees that the two of them were Virasaivas who came from Karnataka to Tiruvannamalai at the same time. It is reported that both of them had served Sivananada Desikar for twelve years. Almost nothing is known about the life of Virupaksha Deva except that he lived in Virupaksha Cave for a long time, and that when he died there his body transformed itself into *vibhuti* (sacred ash). That *vibhuti* is still kept in the cave and *puja* is done to it every day.

On his journey to Tiruvannamalai Guhai Namasivaya came one evening to a village where a wedding was in progress. The head of the house where the wedding was taking place greeted him respectfully, invited him into the house, gave him the place of

honour and performed *puja* to him. At the conclusion of the *puja* everyone present received some *vibhuti* from the hand of Guhai Namasivaya. Shortly afterwards, the house was completely destroyed by a fire. Some people, associating the fire with Guhai Namasivaya's visit, poured scorn on him by saying, 'The ash given by this yogi has turned the house itself into ash'.

Guhai Namasivaya was deeply hurt by this taunt, not personally, but because of the ridicule to which the Lord's *vibhuti* had been subjected. He therefore meditated on Siva and through his grace was able to restore the house to its former unburnt state. Subsequently, those in the village who had formerly reviled him began to praise and worship him as if he were Siva himself. Guhai Namasivaya, perturbed by all the fuss his visit had caused, then took a vow that wherever he went in future, he would never again stay in any house.

On reaching Tiruvannamalai he stuck to his vow and lived in public halls, temple flower gardens and occasionally in the surrounding forest. He devoted himself to the practice of Siva Yoga and became so accomplished in it that he was able to spend long periods in *samadhi*, immersed in his inner *Linga*. Each day he visited the entrance of the Arunachaleswara Temple but went no further because, as a Virasaiva, he was prohibited from worshipping there. It seems that Guhai Namasivaya either had a desire to worship in the temple, or felt that he would benefit by doing so, for each day he would gesture with his hands in the direction of the shrine and to say to himself, 'Are you well without worshipping him?'

There was a *sadhu* called Sivakkira Yogi who noticed that Guhai Namasivaya never went through the temple entrance, but merely made strange gestures there. He interpreted this strange behaviour as deliberate irreverence and decided to punish him by striking him on the back with his cane. Guhai Namasivaya made no attempt to retaliate, nor did he even reproach his attacker. He merely composed an extempore *venba* verse in Tamil to the effect that the Lord had struck him in order to drive out his evil propensities. When Sivakkira Yogi saw Guhai Namasivaya responding in such a humble way, he immediately realised that he had failed to recognise the latter's greatness.

After this incident Guhai Namasivaya began to feel that it would be appropriate for him to enter the temple and worship there. While he was contemplating this breach with tradition, his Guru, Sivananda Desikar, unexpectedly appeared, surrounded by a retinue of his devotees. Guhai Namasivaya greeted him with great love and devotion. In return, Sivananda Desikar spoke to him in a friendly and intimate way. Then to Guhai Namasivaya's surprise, his Guru entered the temple with his disciples, walked straight to the inner sanctum and began to worship Siva there. Guhai Namasivaya, who had accompanied his Guru into the temple, followed his Guru's example. He threw himself full-length on the ground and, filled with ecstasy, mentally worshipped the image of Siva that was enshrined there. When he stood up he could see no sign either of his Guru or his fellow disciples, but when he looked at the *Linga* he had been worshipping, he saw only the form of his Guru. Spontaneously, the following verse came to his lips:

Lord Arunagiri! Form of true knowledge! Guru to whom I call out 'Om Namasivaya!' Do not scorn me as

one who is devoid of Love for you, who is a liar and without self-respect, who is mentally immature and deficient in intelligence, but take me to yourself and be my Lord!(2)

Guhai Namasivaya, realising that the appearance of his Guru had been the play of the Lord, interpreted his vision to mean that he now had permission to enter the temple and worship there. In Virasaivism, the authority of the Guru is paramount. If the Guru sanctions a practice, it immediately becomes acceptable even if it contravenes traditional rules and regulations.

After this incident Guhai Namasivaya decided to take up residence in the entrance to the temple. Each day he was there, he composed a verse in praise of Arunachala-Siva and put together a flower garland. He would then offer both of them to the *Linga* of Lord Siva in the inner shrine. He described his actives in the following verse:

Many times have I wreathed him with flower garlands and adored him with song garlands. My tongue has sung a thousand melodies in praise of him. To see him, the Lord Sonachala [Arunachala], famed all over the earth, I, worthless as I am, need a thousand eyes.(3)

During this period of his life Guhai Namasivaya supported himself by begging for his food and seemed quite content with his spartan existence: 'To beg for food and eat it, and to come here and sleep at the sacred portals - this alone is my happiness.'(4)

After he had lived like this for some time, Lord Siva appeared in one of his dreams and commanded him: 'Remain in a cave on the slopes of our mountain and carry on your yoga practice there.'

Guhai Namasivaya accepted the order and moved into a cave on the lower slopes of the eastern side of the hill. He spent the remainder of his life in this cave and thus acquired the title 'Guhai', which is the Tamil word for cave.

The mountain soon became the main focus of his *sadhana*. To understand how this came about, it will be instructive to compare certain aspects of Virasaivism, particularly the teachings on the nature of *Linga*, with the spiritual traditions that are associated with Arunachala. The Virasaivas conceive of *Linga*, in its unmanifest form, as a blazing mass or column of light in the heart of each devotee. At the time of initiation, the Guru draws out this power, installs it in a physical form, the *Ishtalinga*, and instructs the disciple to worship it as if it were Siva himself. In the case of Arunachala, Siva initially appeared as a dazzling, limitless column of light and then later transformed himself into the physical *Linga* of Arunachala. As Ramana Maharishi remarked on several occasions, the hill is not the abode of Siva or a symbolic representation of him, it is, like the *Ishtalinga* of Virasaivas, Siva manifesting in a *Linga*-shaped form. This is what he had to say to someone who enquired which portion of the hill was the holiest and most sacred:

The whole hill is sacred. It is Siva himself. Just as we identify ourselves with a body, so Siva has chosen to identify himself with the hill. Arunachala is pure wisdom in the form of a hill. It is out of compassion for those who seek him that he has chosen to reveal himself in the form of a hill visible to the eye.(5)

There is a tradition in Tiruvannamalai that the *Lingam* in the

Arunachaleswara Temple and the mountain *Lingam* of Arunachala are one and the same. Thus, when Sivananda Desikar manifested and superimposed his image on the temple *Lingam*, Guhai Namasivaya, who had been worshipping that image, received the message that his Guru and Arunachala were identical. This understanding is mentioned in the verse he immediately composed. Furthermore, realising that the vision had authorised him to regard Arunachala as his Guru, he began to worship the Mountain as a Guru *Linga*. He described this new relationship and the effect it had on him in the following verse:

Taking into my heart as my Guru the Red Mountain
Lord [Arunachala], who now stands formless before me,
I have put to flight the unutterable arrogance of my
good and evil deeds, my soul's indissoluble threefold
impurity and my unparalleled accumulation of karma.

(6)

In Virasaivism it is the Guru's job to cleanse the devotee of the threefold impurities that cling to the three bodies. This process would have been initiated by Guhai Namasivaya's human Guru, but as the above verse clearly states, it was Arunachala-Siva who completed the job.

By channelling his devotional fervour towards the mountain, he was able to generate a level of love that he had never experienced from worshipping his *Ishtalinga* and practising Siva Yoga:

Except for the ineffable Lord Annamalai and His
consort Unnamulai, who sits at his Lordship's side, I
have known no other gods. Or, if I have known them, I
have never cherished them in my heart of hearts
Monarch who dwells as the Red Mountain! When I
lauded you as the Supreme One, worshipping and
praising you with melting heart, when I sought you with
hands clasped and with tears running down from my
eyes, you granted me my boon, according to my desire.
O King of compassion! I find nothing which I can
adequately offer in return.(7)

The boon he sought was nothing less than freedom from the cycle of birth and death:

My heart! By praising the bounteous one who drives
away the effects of evil deeds that torment perpetually
the hearts of those in whose mind there is attachment,
we have received our boon. We have received the fruit
that is proper for this human birth: we have ceased to be
reborn.(8)

In one of his other verses he indicates indirectly that he obtained this boon by thinking continuously and lovingly of the Red Mountain Lord:

Those who desire the boons of fame, long life and
children, all praise the Red Mountain Lord. For those
who praise him continually, incapable of forgetting him
even when asleep, there is no further rebirth.(9)

Guhai Namasivaya makes no mention in his verses of the Siva Yoga that he had perfected in his early life. He may have given it up sometime after his arrival in Tiruvannamalai for he frequently asserts in his poetry that devotion to Siva and complete surrender to him are quite sufficient to attain liberation. His own devotional practices were simple and direct. We know, for example from the

writings of his best-known disciple, Guru Namasivaya, that Guhai Namasivaya composed a four-line verse each day in praise of Arunachala: 'Mountain to which Guhai Namasivaya, performer of immensely great austerities, makes obeisance, daily adorning him with a garland of one *venba* verse.'⁽¹⁰⁾

He had begun the practice while he was still living in the temple entrance, and he seems to have continued it when he moved into the cave on the hill. He must have composed thousands of verses in praise of the mountain, but very few of them have been preserved. Only two of his poems have been published *Arunagiri Antadi* (100 verses) and *Tiruvarunai Tanivenba* (36 verses). A few other stray verses of his can be found in quotations in the writings of other people, but it would seem that the bulk of his poetic output has been irretrievably lost.⁽¹¹⁾

Although he was born in Karanataka and spoke Kannada as his mother tongue, he thoroughly mastered the Tamil language. His principal extant poem, *Arunagiri Antadi* is often used as a text in Tamil schools to illustrate the intricacies of the *venba* metre. Ramana Maharshi remarked on several occasions that this metre was reputed to be the most difficult form to compose in; and Ganapati Muni, a superb extempore poet, once confessed that the *venba* metre was so difficult, he was unable to utilise it. Dandapani Swami, a famous 19th century poet and scholar, felt that Guhai Namasivaya's poetry was so good it could only have been composed as a result of divine inspiration. In his verse biography of Guhai Namasivaya he wrote: 'Although learned in no language other than Kannada, my Lord Siva caused him to compose *venba* verses of an excellence that only the most eminent of Tamil poets could equal. He could not have done it had he relied on his own inspiration alone.'⁽¹²⁾

In addition to composing verse, Guhai Namasivaya also performed *pradakshina* of the mountain and repeated the great mantra of Saivism, *Nama Sivaya*. In several of his verses he encourages other people to take up these practices and, in addition, to think continuously of Arunachala.

Be they of lowly birth, without the advantage of learning, unable to practise the virtue of liberality, it is of no account. Those who perform *pradakshina* of holy Aruna, the Supreme, submit to his rule and become his devotee, will excel even amongst the most excellent. Recite the five-lettered name of the First One, the Red Mountain Lord, and meditate upon it. Thus will the straight path, the steadfast condition and the marks of true knowledge become manifest to you. Your every wish will be granted, and fulfilment will be yours. Taking a necklace of *rudraksha* beads, whose nature is suited to solitude, recite the five letters [*Na ma Si va ya*] with full voice, one by one, mindful of their meaning. Thus, earnestly seeking the feet of Lord Sonagiri [Arunachala], whose ornament is the snake, we shall obtain the boon of freedom from death for all eternity. My heart! Fix your thoughts on the Red Mountain Teacher, who, if you believe in his grace and praise him daily, will take hold of you, desirous of your good, saying, 'Behold, I am here!' If you think of him in this way, all the painful effects of your actions will subside.

and go away.(13)

There is a famous story concerning Guhai Namasivaya that seems to show that although he had great devotion to Arunachala, he was still capable of displaying bursts of extreme anger. One day, according to this story, he took pity on a poor man whose only goat had been killed by a snake just before it was about to give birth. Guhai Namasivaya asked the man to leave the goat's body with him and to collect it the next day. When the man returned to pick up the corpse, he found that not only had the goat been restored to life, it had also given birth to two kids. As news of this miracle spread around the town, some boys from the local weaving community decided to play a joke on him. One boy, pretending to be dead, was carried into the presence of Guhai Namasivaya by his friends. The boys claimed that their friend had died of a snake bite and asked the saint to restore him to life. Guhai Namasivaya, who could see that they were merely making fun of him, cursed them with such vehemence that the boy who was pretending to be dead actually did die. Then Guhai Namasivaya cursed the whole weaving community, saying that they would never prosper or flourish in Tiruvannamalai again. The curse took effect: all the weavers were forced to leave town or take up other occupations because none of them could make a living by weaving in Tiruvannamalai. In the years that followed, all attempts to re-establish weaving businesses in the town failed.

Guhai Namasivaya made better use of his power and his anger on another occasion, with equally devastating results. A barbarian chieftan called Agittu once invaded and looted the town. He murdered many of the inhabitants, abducted a large number of the town's young women and, in an act of deliberate desecration, he set up camp in one of the temple courtyards and roasted an ox there. When news of this reached Guhai Namasivaya, he became angry and rebuked Lord Arunachaleswara in the following manner:

Lord Sonesan! Are your three eyes, including the eye on your forehead, fast asleep? Has someone stolen away the battle-axe and trident you wield? Haven't you any self-respect? Shall all your devotees be abandoned to an accursed death?(14)

Arunachaleswara accepted the justness of the complaint and, for the sake of Guhai Namasivaya, decided to intervene in the matter. That night the Lord appeared to Agittu in a dream in the form of a *sadhu* and struck him on the back with his stick. Agittu woke up immediately and noticed that on the spot where he had been beaten there was a rash that soon grew and developed into a large, swollen abscess. He consulted some of the elders of the town, recounting his dream to them. They all advised him that he could only save his life by leaving the temple. Agittu, not wanting any further punishment, abandoned the temple to the *pujaris* and the town's devotees who cleared up his mess and reconsecrated the holy shrine. However, Agittu could not escape the wrath of Guhai Namasivaya and Lord Arunachaleswara. His abscess grew and worms appeared in it, which gnawed away at his healthy flesh. All remedies failed, including one horrific experiment in which he applied foetuses, taken from pregnant women he had slaughtered for the purpose, to the wound. When he eventually died in great agony, his death was celebrated throughout Tiruvannamalai. The

local people anointed themselves with oil, put on new clothes, ate a special meal and danced in exaltation.

When Guhai Namasivaya reached 100 years of age, the thought occurred to him: 'The span allotted to man by Brahma is 100 years. That is enough for this worldly life.' He had his disciples prepared a *samadhi* pit for him, intending to enter it and give up his life there. But, as he was lowering himself into the crypt, Lord Siva spoke to him, ordering him to stay a further 100 years on earth. His resigned response to the Lord's intervention is recorded in one of his verses:

To me, a devotee of blissful Lord Arunagiri, who is kinder to me than any mother or wise father, it matters little whether he ordains that I should die, or that I should suffer on in this delusive body, in spite of my 100 years.(15)

One hundred years later he had another *samadhi* pit prepared in the cave that now bears his name. Before lowering himself into it, he composed his final two verses:

I will no longer bear this delusive body, which is the dwelling place of all the 360 diseases known to our science. Lord Arunesan, who wears in his locks the holy waters and the waning moon! May you wipe out at once this birth for the sake of your solitary devotee We have found refuge at the feet of our father, Lord Sonagiri. We have crossed the threefold waters of our final birth. Behold! No longer do we bow down to the lotus-born Brahma, the creator, nor to Yama [the god of death] who rides the powerful buffalo.(16)



The only known image of Guhai Namasivaya. It comes from a granite, bas-relief that is located in the rear of a mantapam that adjoins the cave where Guhai Namasivaya was interred.

After saying these words, he descended into the *samadhi* pit and seated himself in the full-lotus position. Then, utilising a practice he had mastered during his days as a Siva yogi, he gave up his life by sending the *pranas* out of his body via the *bramarandhra* at the top of his head. His disciples erected a *Linga* on the spot and instituted worship of it. Daily *puja* has been

conducted there right down to the present day.



Samadhi of Guhai Namasivaya

Thus ended the life of a great Arunachala *bhakta*. His long stay on the mountain had taught him the simple truth that those who surrender lovingly and completely to the Red Mountain Lord have all their sins and karma washed away:

I have perceived the means of dissolving away all the manifold maladies that beset my life and crush me down. I have taken into my heart the lotus feet of the Red Mountain Lord. What then do I lack? For those who are without love for the Red Mountain Lord, who cleaves away falsehood and subjects us to his rule, will it be of any benefit to mortify the body? Whether he brings ruin upon our heads, or whether he lifts us up through his grace, repeat the name of Lord Sonesan and believe in his word.(17)

(1) *The Virasaivite Saints - A Study* - by H. Thipperudra Swamy p. 255.

(2) *Tiruvārunai Tanivenba*, v. 11.

(3) *Tiruvārunai Tanivenba*, v. 30.

(4) *Tiruvārunai Tanivenba*, v. 35.

(5) *Ramana Pictorial Souvenir*, p. 7.

(6) *Arunagiri Antadi*, v. 85.

(7) *Arunagiri Antadi*, vv. 87 and 8.

(8) *Arunagiri Antadi*, v. 13.

(9) *Arunagiri Antadi*, v. 27.

(10) *Annamalai Venba*, v. 7.

(11) When I wrote this paragraph in the late 1980s, the information it contains was the accepted scholarly view. I subsequently discovered more than 300 verses that were previously thought to be lost. Some of these verses appear elsewhere on this site. See [Arunagiri Malai](#) for more details.

(12) *Pulavar Puranam*, 'Guhai Namasivayar Sarukkam', v. 14.

(13) *Arunagiri Antadi*, vv. 26, 53, 42, 22.

(14) *Tiruvārunai Tanivenba*, v. 25.

(15) *Tiruvārunai Tanivenba*, v. 33.

(16) *Tiruvārunai Tanivenba*, vv. 20, 18.

(17) *Arunagiri Antadi*, vv. 67, 89, 40.

Arunagiri Malai

By Guhai Namasivaya
(Translated by Robert Butler)
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Guhai Namasivaya

(Click on image to enlarge)

I have taken this poem from an unpublished collection of Tamil verses by Guhai Namasivaya that I found in the mid-1980s. Since they are all in the *venba* metre, they may be some of the verses that Guhai Namasivaya was composing every day as an offering to Arunachala. The title translates as *A Garland for Arunagiri*. Arunagiri, meaning 'Red Mountain', is one of the Tamil names of Arunachala.

Benedictory Verse

In composing this garland in praise of Mount Arunagiri
Who dwells in the world as a column of fire,
Sought in vain by the swan and the boar,(1)
We invoke the protection of Lord Ganapati,(2)
The child who leads the elephant hordes,
In whom all good qualities are embodied.

1

Holy Mount Aruna whom the world reveres,
Through your grace you have brought wisdom
Into the heart of a fool such as I
So that in the flawless glory
Of your musk-drenched holy foot
My spirit might be seeped.

2

Lord Arunagiri, dispeller of our actions' fruit,
Never have I performed an act deeming it righteous
Nor refrained from one realising its wrongness,
Without you to inspire and guide my every move.

3

Often will the holy feet
Of tank-girt southern Arunachala's King
Enter my sinner's heart;
A life-giving support upon my lonely journey,
They will fulfil my every aspiration.

4

Lord Sankara!
With foot and eye
You trampled and burned Yama and Kama.(3)
And now my thoughts have no fit object,
Noble Lord Arunachala,
But your own two feet.

5

Were I to perform countless evil deeds
That bind the soul,
Those bonds could not grip and hold me,
For I have beheld the lotus foot of Aruna's Lord
Whose glory Mal and lotus-born Brahma sing.(4)

6

Dispeller of the wicked deeds
Of those who meditate upon you!
Arunagiri's King!
Bridegroom of the gods! When will it be
That my sensual desires are cut away,
And I reach and dwell at your golden foot?
Speak, my Lord? When will it be?

7

I am a worthless wretch who never yearned
For the bliss of pure consciousness,
Never contemplated in his heart of hearts
That supreme and arduous path.
What way could there be for one such as I
To slough off the burden of former deeds?
What way to praise your golden foot
And wear it as an ornament?

8

You whose flowery foot unfolds victorious
In our hearts, Aruna's eternal Lord!
In an instant the powerful residues of former deeds (5)
And the soul's threefold impurity (6)
Will all be reduced to ash
If only we fix our minds upon
The bejewelled lotus of the foot.

9

You who hold dominion over the minds
Of those who love you!
Wise Lord of Arunachala!
King whose liberality is unfailing!
Although I have paid heed to those
Who, desirous of gaining your holy foot,
Have established it within their hearts,
Alone and destitute I cannot cleanse the stain
From my own sinful heart.

10

Lord of Arunachala, who conquered my heart
On a day so hard to describe!
For a dog such as I it is equally fitting
Whether you thrust away from you
Or gather up and protect
This head that I have laid at your feet.

11

Lord of Arunachala, provider of sustenance!
Will there be further births
Upon this wide earth
For those who praise you,
Even if they are not free of the effects of former deeds,
Of their mind's wandering and other distinctions?
If they have not abandoned the sense of self?

12

My heart, we have attained to the knowledge
Of Arunachala's King whom we revere and praise
So that we may worship him in his temple
And glorify him time and time again.
Rejoicing, we have put to flight and banished
All our evil ways.

13

Since you are my Master
And I am one of your herd,
Divine Lord of Arunachala,
Consider this:
If there is any fault with that herd (7)
The responsibility lies with the Master alone.
If you do not guard me from evil,
It is not I but you alone
The world will blame!

14

Lord Sankara, dwelling upon Aruna's Mount,
You who never come near the hearts of the deceitful!
For a wretch such as I
Who has not sought the supreme state

Nor laid aside secular works
Nor enshrined a holy teacher in his heart of stone,
What recourse can there be?
Speak!

15

My spirit, what cause is there for distress
Now that you have spoken the name
Of him who knows no equal?
Now that, grasping their meaning,
You have uttered aloud the five holy letters (8)
Of Arunachala's Lord, the eternal one
Who in former times knew the demon's heart
And punished him?(9)

16

Our inner eye will blossom, my heart of stone!
As for the worlds that lotus-borne Brahma fashions,(10)
It will be in our power to create them all,
If only we think upon and praise the two feet
Of Arunachala's Lord,
Of him who tore out the great tooth of the sun,(11)
Whom none can approach!

17

Though we learn to drink the bitter sap of plants
And water choked with dead leaves,
Though we learn to eat in the morning only,
Can anything be gained
Other than what is freely granted
By our Lord and God of Arunachala,
From whose lofty trident
A flower garland hangs?
Speak!

18

If you ask a fool which is greater,
Impurity or the power of Arunachala's Lord,
He will be convinced that the answer is impurity.
However, the Lord will know those true devotees
Whose minds have grasped the supreme,
And he will enter and dwell within their hearts,
However subtle the impurity.

19

King whose adornments are manifold!
Arunachala's Lord!
Transcender of time, in whose brow
An eye is set!(12)
My own Father whose throat darkened
As the tide of poison rose!(13)

Will the day come
That I break free
From the round of births?

20

My heart, if we are chastised
By the good Lord of Arunachala
So that the evil in us is driven out,
Is it to do us harm?
Does the washerman feel any anger
When he beats clothing on a stone
To remove the dirt?(14)

21

Ever worshipping him and praising him
With melting hearts
And performing sweet service,
His devotees will behold
The two feet of Aruna's Lord
Who bears the chill moon in his locks.(15)
Swiftly they will hasten
Towards their final liberation.

22

I shall sell my worldly goods,
Bring gifts to a suitable place,
Set them out and make offerings;
Such is the service I now offer you.
Why do you remain thus,
Lord of Arunachala
Without any belief in me?

23

Immovable Mountain,
You who are ever mindful
Of those who in their hearts
Trust you alone and no other!
Formerly you were known as the Lord
Who watches over those
Who seek his protection.
But what now, my Lord of Arunachala?

24

Our Master and Lord of Arunachala,
If we do not trust in
The fair lotus of your foot,
If we do not recite the five syllables
Of your noble and holy name
And smear out bodies with the sacred ash that purifies,(16)
to cross the powerful,
Never-ceasing torrent of births

Will be difficult indeed.

26

You who slew the lion-god Vishnu
Who himself had slain
The huge and warlike demon Hiranya!(17)
Great Lord of Arunachala,
Who swallowed the poison as it arose!
Who is there who could know your form?
Speak!

27

There are worthless tongues:
The bell has one,
As does a pair of scales.(18)
There are the evil tongues
Of the unrighteous.
Tell me, Arunachala's King,
Is not the noble tongue
That praises your five-lettered name
The only one that knows true sweetness?

28

There is no general who would dare
To lead his army into battle
Against those who revere the foot
Of our Lord of Arunachala
Whose glory is known through the learned *Vedas*
And numerous other related works,
Our leader who rides a prancing bull.

29

Yama knows his foot,
Vishnu, his savage spear and battle axe.(19)
Brahma knows his intent,
Parvati his physical form.
Beyond this,
Who can know the form of Arunachala's Lord?
Speak!

30

Tell me,
Why those great tomes?
And why the six religious systems?(20)
Why this talk of austerities,
And why these thoughts of fasting
When desire's eternal onslaught
Can be quelled by Aruna's Lord,
For whom my heart possesses
The greatest desire of all?

You may intone the scriptures;
 You may know all there is to know
 About the world as it exists
 From its beginning to its final end.
 But what of that?
 Those who have no love
 For Mount Aruna's flawless Teacher,
 Whose justice ever prevails,
 Will remain in bondage,
 Condemned in this world and the next.

Unless it is so ordained
 By our Lord of Arunachala,
 Who creates the universe in its entirety
 And then draws it back into himself,
 The fevered mind, though it suffer
 A hundred thousand painful thoughts,
 Will not be one atom better,
 Or for that matter, one atom worse.

Taking birth as plant and animal,
 Those who have not paid homage
 To the foot of the perfect one,
 The Lord of Arunachala
 Whom even the conquering Kama failed to subdue,
 Will wander ceaselessly upon the earth.

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Photo of Arunachala, courtesy Dev Gogoi

(1) The principal puranic story about Arunachala features a dispute between Brahma and Vishnu over which of them is the greater. Siva witnessed their dispute and decided to teach them a lesson in humility. He appeared before them in the form of an infinitely long column of light (some versions say fire) and announced that whichever of the two could find the end of this column could call himself the greater. Vishnu took the form of a boar and burrowed downwards to find the bottom end, while Brahma took the form of a swan and flew upward in search of the top. Neither extremity was found even though the two Gods spent thousands of years trying. Both returned unsuccessful, finally conceding that Siva was greater than either of them. Vishnu then requested Siva to manifest in a form that was less dazzling to the eyes so that devotees through the ages could have *darshan* of his form. Siva obliged by condensing himself into the form of Arunachala. Thus, for devotees of Arunachala, the mountain is not merely a symbol of Siva or the place where he resides, it is Siva himself, manifesting in a physical form

(2) This is the benedictory verse. So, following poetic tradition, Guhai Namasivaya invokes the blessings of the elephant-headed God, Ganapati, the deity of auspicious beginnings.

(3) Sankara is one of the names of Siva.

Yama is the Hindu god of death. The reference to trampling him comes from the story of Markandeya.

Mrikanda, Markandeya's father had prayed to Siva to get a son. Siva appeared before him and said, 'Do you desire to have a virtuous, wise and pious son who will only live to be sixteen, or a dull-witted, evil-natured son who will live for a long time.'

Mrikanda opted for the short-lived son, who turned out to be a child-sage. On the day of his appointed death, Yama came to collect him. Markandeya cried out to Siva for help and embraced the idol of Siva that he usually meditated on. Yama threw his rope and lassoed the idol as well as Markandeya. This angered Siva, who came roaring down from the heavens, after which he killed Yama with a single blow of his foot. Siva then gave Markandeya a boon that he could be sixteen forever, and thus avoid death, and he also restored Yama's life.

Kama, the God of love, was sent to Siva by Brahma in an attempt to make Siva fall in love with Parvati and marry her. Brahma had foreseen that only an offspring of the two could defeat a demon called Taraka who was threatening the gods. When Kama aimed an arrow of love at Siva's heart, Siva, who was in *samadhi*, opened his third eye, which had been focused inside, and burned Kama to ashes with a single look. Siva eventually brought into being Subramania, without any outside intervention, it was he who finally conquered and destroyed Taraka.

(4) In the *Mahabharata* and some of the *Puranas* Brahma is born from a lotus that sprang from the navel of Vishnu. Mal is one of the Tamil names of Vishnu.

(5) This is the *sanchita karma*, the accumulated *karma* of former births that still remains to be experienced.

(6) *Saiva Siddhanta* postulates three fundamental entities - God (*Pati*), the aggregate of all the souls in the world (*pasu*) and *pasa*, that which binds the soul to worldliness. *Pasa* is also known as *malam* or impurity and it has three components: (1) *Anava* - ignorance or egotism that is attached to the soul (2) *Maya* - the ever-changing matter which makes up manifestation, or the seed from which it arises (3) *Karma* - the actions that the soul engages in via the body and the mind. These bring about retributive consequences for the performer of those acts: pleasant consequences for the good activities, and unpleasant for the bad.

(7) In *Saiva Siddhanta* the Lord is called *Pati*. The word for the totality of souls which he looks after is *pasu*. Literally, this means 'cattle'. Guhai Namasivaya is saying here that full responsibility for the herd of souls lies with Siva, and not with the individual people.

(8) *Na, Ma, Si, Va, and Ya*, which together comprise *Nama Sivaya*, which means 'Obeisance to Siva'. This is the most sacred and powerful mantra for Saivas.

(9) A somewhat vague reference. I would guess it refers to Ravana, the demon king of Lanka.

(10) Among the gods, Brahma's principal function is the creation of the world.

(11) Siva once cut off one of Brahma's five heads to punish him for the arrogance of believing that he was the supreme deity. Brahma then cursed him, saying that he would always have to beg for his food, using the skull as a begging bowl. This made Siva very angry, so he went on the rampage, killing thousands of *devas* in the process. At one point Surya, the sun god, confronted him and tried to make him stop. Siva hit him in the face and knocked out all his teeth. When Siva's anger had subsided, he restored them all.

(12) The two normal eyes of Siva represent the sun and the moon. The third, in the centre of the forehead, symbolises fire. The eyes together represent the three sources of light that illumine the earth, space and the sky. Through his three eyes Siva can see past, present and future, an accomplishment which, as Guhai Namasivaya points out, enables him to transcend time. The central eye is the eye of higher perception. Normally it is directed inwards, but when it is turned outwards, it burns all that appears before it.

(13) The *devas* and the *asuras* were once churning the ocean of milk, hoping to get from it *amrita*, the elixir of immortality. At one point a burning mass of poison came out, emanating poisonous fumes. When Brahma requested Siva to

help, he responded by swallowing the poison. Though the poison did not harm him, it left a blue mark on his throat. From that time on, one of his names has been Nilakantha, meaning 'Blue-throated'.

When poets address Arunachala Siva, they are not merely conceiving of him in the limited role of the God who appeared there as a consequence of the Brahma-Vishnu dispute. He is, for them, the same Siva who swallowed the poison and who starred in countless other mythic encounters.

(14) Bhagavan was probably commenting on this verse in *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 447: 'Sri Bhagavan said that a saint Namah Sivaya who was formerly living in Arunachala must have undergone considerable difficulties. For he has sung a song saying, "God proves the devotee by means of severe ordeals. A washerman beats the cloth on a slab, not to tear it, but only to remove the dirt."'

(15) Siva wears as a diadem on his head the crescent of the fifth-day moon. According to *Sri Siva Tattva*, a *Saiva Siddhanta* text, 'The moon is *soma*, the sacrificial offering. Placed near the fiery third eye, the crescent moon shows the power of creation coexistent with that of destruction.'

(16) Sacred ash (*vibhuti*) is revered in all schools of Saivism. In Virasaivism, the tradition in which Guhai Namasivaya was brought up, eight *varanas*, or aids to spiritual life, are spoken of. Several of them are alluded to in this and other verses. The *varanas* are: (1) obedience to a qualified Guru (2) worship of the *Lingam* (3) reverence for the *jangama*, the Virasaiva monks (4) the wearing of *rudraksha* beads (5) the use of *vibhuti* (6) taking *prasad* from the Guru (7) purification through water that has washed the Guru's feet (8) repetition of the sacred five syllables: '*Nama Sivaya*'.

(17) One of Vishnu's *avatars* was as Narasimha, a half-man and half-lion form. Narasimha disembowelled the demon Hiranyakasipu, who had harassed the gods. After the demon had been killed, Narasimha was still full of anger and threatened to annihilate the whole universe. Siva appeared in the form of Simbul (in Sanskrit he is known as Sarabha), an eight-legged flying creature. This 'bird' dug its claws into Narasimha, lifted him off the ground and killed him. Siva subsequently wore the skin of Narasimha as an item of clothing.

(18) This is a play on the Tamil word *naa*, which can mean a tongue, the pointer on a pair of scales and the clapper in a bell.

(19) I don't know the reference here. Though Vishnu and Siva are often portrayed as competing gods, they do not, so far as I am aware, ever use their weapons on each other.

(20) The six major cults of Hinduism (*shanmata*), codified and sanctioned by Adi Sankaracharya are the worship of (1) Siva (2) Vishnu (3) Devi or Sakti (4) Ganapati (5) Kumara (6) Surya, the sun.

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34

The Lord of Arunachala,
He who sports with his royal consort,
Will remain within the hearts
Of those whose one desire
Is to behold him in the guise
Of the blissful dancer of Tillai's hall.(21)
He will not make his home
In the hearts of those
Who despise his friends.

35

What may be the holy state
Of those whose great treasure
Is Arunachala, eternally glorious,
I do not know.
I am a simple devotee
Who worships his golden foot.
Before I leave this body
Will that divine vision be mine,
Or will it pass away?

36

The effects of ancient deeds,
Sin and a multitude of afflictions,
Poverty and inescapable death,
All will disappear
For those who stand alone,
Praising him whose forehead bears a third eye,
Our sweet Lord Arunagiri!

37

You who swallowed the poison

Dripping from a serpent's fang
As if it were sweet ambrosia,
Our Lord of Aruna's Mount!
If you do not take pity on me
And take me to yourself
Like a mother with her new-born child,
A loving father, or a holy teacher,
What other salvation can there be
For a poor wretch such as I?

38

My spirit, accept the protection
Of the King, who justly ordains
Every birth we must endure
On salvation's path,
Our Lord of Arunachala,
Who cleaves to us
And rules our hearts.
If you have any wavering thoughts,
Put them aside!

39

Nowhere in this world
Have we seen unique miracles like those
Performed by the sage of Arunachala
Whose glory spreads far and wide.
When he walked upon the earth
He had cause to kill Yama with a kick
And flay the skin of a tiger
Wearing a form no eye could endure.(22)

40

Listen, my heart, while I tell you
Something wondrous indeed:
Those who have paid homage
To the Lord of Arunachala,
Who wears the dark ocean's poison,
And have immersed themselves
In the holy tank where he once bathed,
Shall never again be immersed,
Mark you well, in the waters of a mother's womb.

41

Come, Lord of Arunachala,
Grant me my one desire,
Which is to sing your praises!
The whole world will praise
Those who have renounced it,
As long as they in turn praise you.
But if they forget you
The world will revile them
And call them wicked.

42

To be as rulers of the earth;
To live like the gods in heaven;
To be united with the red lotus of his foot;
Such will be the lot of those
Who meditate upon the name of him
Whose ornaments are human bones(23)
And a cobra with a spreading hood,
Our Lord of Arunachala.

43

Hard indeed would it be
For anyone to change
What the Lord has ordained.
But the false-hearted of this world
Do not believe it, alas.
They do not seek the goodness
Of Arunagiri's Lord,
But wander from birth to birth,
Suffering in vain.

44

Those whose tongues speak not
The name of the wise one
Who consumed the ocean's poison,
Our heavenly protector,
The Lord of southern Arunachala,
Will suffer great distress,
Seeking only earthly pleasures,
And speaking to others of pleasure only.

45

Even if the rains fall
And famine comes,
And the messengers of death stalk the earth,
Those who pay homage to the holy one
Whose munificence is ever unfailing
Towards those who worship his golden foot,
The devotees of Arunachala's Lord,
Will not deviate from their path.

46

Other than him,
We revere no other God.
As for those who do so,
We consider them worthless.
Those who love earthly things
Will not win our esteem,
But for the Lord of Arunachala,
Our praise will be without limit.

Those who have seen the glory
 That Vishnu could not see,
 Nor Brahma on his white lotus pad,
 Will speak thus:
 'Earth's eight-shouldered Godhead, Lord of Arunagiri!
 Your noble consort
 Shares your very form. See, is it not so.'

Dear heart, of what use is anything
 That originates in mental activity?
 There are those who, to their grief,
 Have no love for Arunachala's fair Lord,
 But, imitating the righteous,
 Heap garlands at his feet and cry out:
 'Lord of the matted locks, our salvation!'
 As for us, we shall not thus abuse his name.

For those who have sought refuge
 At the feet of the holy one
 Whose body is smeared with ash,
 He whose name is sweet
 Upon the lips of his devotees,
 There will be no death.
 Nor can there be any sin
 For those who praise him.

Searching earth and heaven
 As a boar and as a swan,
 Did either Vishnu or Brahma
 See his head or his foot?
 In the end, their knowledge
 Of Arunachala's Lord Sankara
 Amounted to nothing.
 Who else, then, could know him
 Through and through,
 His beginning and his end?([24](#))

My heart,
 He who sent the three cities
 Of his demon enemies
 Tumbling down upon the broad earth,([25](#))
 The Lord of Arunachala
 Will come to my aid,
 Entering my very soul.
 What, then, have you to fear?

Speak!

52

If you devote to Aruna's Lord
One hundredth part of the desire
You lavish on bright-eyed maidens,
You will, without a shadow of doubt,
Discover his true nature, my heart,
And win for yourself eternal life.

53

Even if the devotees of Aruna's Lord
Embraced evil, committing sinful deeds,
Those deeds would not adhere to them
And grip them in return;
No more than a barren woman
However much she had intercourse,
Would become with child.

54

Listen, my heart, to this wondrous news,
Never before proclaimed upon the earth:
Those who cross the broad threshold
That fosters the holy service
Of the Primal One, Aruna's Lord,
And make obeisance to him there,
Will never again pass through
The door of a mother's womb.
This you should know.

55

Lord of Mount Arunagiri,
You who manifest as the sense organs,
Merging inseparably with the five senses,
Dwelling deathlessly
Where no hand can reach
And cast you out,
Tell me, what way is there
To subdue and control all this?

56

To cut off our desires is the teacher's duty.
Is this any different
From banishing our soul's original defilement?
Lord of Arunachala,
The presence of desire upon this broad earth
Is freely granted.
Is it any different then
To grant that that same desire
Might be destroyed?(26)

57

What sin can there be
To say that the Lord of Arunachala
Is the creator
Rather than Brahma or Vishnu?
When Lord Siva cut off
One of Brahma's five heads
Was the 'creator' able to recreate that?

58

Apart from Mother Uma and Father Arunachala
What other family is there for all that lives?
Speak!
All things, diminished at first
Through their birth,
Grow to greatness
By dint of long austerities.

59

There are some men who seek our father,
The Lord of Arunachala,
Not knowing that he dwells for all time
Within the hearts of those
Who praise him in song
As he dances his dance of bliss.
Such men run hither and thither,
Their minds in confusion,
Saying 'What might his dwelling place be?'

60

For those who do not fix their thoughts
Upon the red lotus foot of Annamalai's Lord
Whose upraised hand is filled with flames
And who shares his form with the maiden Ambikai,[\(27\)](#)
Every day they devote to spiritual practice
Will be a day spent in vain.

61

Although I have so often seen
The outward form of Arunachala's Lord
Wearing, as he is wont, the auspicious snake,
My mind and body are sick and dying,
For I have experienced that manifestation
In which he becomes one with my very Self,
And failed to realise the truth of it.

62

Great teacher, so hard to reach
For Brahma and Vishnu,
Yet so easy for me!

Arunachala's bounteous Lord,
Know this:
That just as a song and its melody
Are eternally one with each other,
Your form never leaves my eye,
Never fades from my sight.

64

Listen, my heart, it will be to you
As if you surveyed all the encircling earth
Without need of any conveyance
When you are born as a devotee of Arunachala's Lord,
Worshipping the lotus foot of the immaculate One
Who wears the fair *rudraksha* beads.

65

Should you aspire to be delivered
From the cycle of pleasure and pain
That has hounded you from ancient times,
You should know, my heart,
That except through the divine presence
Of the Lord of the matted locks,
Who dwells on holy Arunachala,
There can be no escape.

66

Seeing the fragrant golden foot,
The ruddy features, shining with grace
Of abiding Arunachala's Lord,
Never harbouring a single false desire,
You wander on and on, my heart.
But when will you bathe in bliss' flood?
Ask When?

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(21) Siva as Natarajan, who performs his cosmic dance in the Chidambaram temple ('Tillai's hall').

(22) There is a puranic story in which Siva appeared before some *rishis* in the Taraka forest in the guise of a beggar. Through his power he caused the *rishi's* wives to fall in love with him. The *rishis*, angered by his behaviour, decided to kill him. They dug a pit, out of which emerged a tiger. Siva killed it and wore its skin. Later snakes came out of the pit, but they had no effect on Siva. He wound them around his body and used them as ornaments. Because of this incident Siva is almost always depicted as having at least one poisonous snake wrapped around his body. Siva began his cosmic dance in this forest, but later moved it to Chidambaram because the Taraka forest was not a powerful enough place to contain the energy. When Siva, in the form of Natarajan, performs his cosmic dance, only three people are permitted to witness it: Siva's consort and two *rishis* who were blessed by Siva with the boon of being able to witness the dance. It is widely believed that no one else could endure the power of such a *darshan*.

(23) After Siva decapitated Brahma's fifth head, he threaded the skull on the necklace he wears.

(24) *Saiva Siddhanta*, the philosophy that grew out of the poems of the early

Saiva saints, is at heart a dualistic creed. Though it accepts that freedom from bondage can be obtained through Siva's grace, it does not accept that one can ever know Siva fully, as he knows himself. An echo of this can be found in the word Annamalai, one of the most common names for Arunachala. It means 'unreachable or unapproachable mountain'.

(25) At a time when the *devas* and the *asuras* were having one of their many wars, the three cities of the *asuras* were protected by a boon which specified that they could only be destroyed by one shot of a single arrow. When the *devas* were on the point of finally losing, they appealed to Siva and he obliged them by destroying all the *asura* cities with a single shot.

(26) The threefold impurity (karma, ego and *maya*) is held to be inherent in the soul's nature. This 'original defilement' can only be removed by the grace of the teacher. In Saivism, Siva is often perceived to be both Guru and God. Occasionally, as with Manikkavachagar, he even takes on a human form to act as a Guru. Thus, in addition to his godly functions such as world-creation, Siva also fulfils the role of an embodied teacher, instructing and removing the ignorance of those he deems worthy.

(27) One of the many names of Siva's consort.

Arunagiri Malai

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67

Who could exist upon the earth,
Lord of Arunachala,
If you alone did not exist?
Without being born, you are.
Could then anyone die
Once they have taken birth in this world?

68

See, my heart,
When troubles come,
Arunachala's Lord will rush to the attack,
Protecting his devotees against them,
Just as the hand will instinctively grasp
A garment that is about to become untied.
In this there is no room for doubt.

69

Upon Mount Arunachala
Where lotus-filled tanks
And paddy fields,
All put forth a crop of pearls,
Lord Sankara, adorned with Uma's form,
You burn up the blossoms of doubt!
How then could it be, that in anger,
You consumed the god of love in flames?
Tell me, how could it be?

70

Once at our shrine of Kanchipuram,
Accepting my surrender,
The Lord of Arunachala,
He who shares his form with Mother Uma

Placed his foot upon my head
As men looked on,
And made me his own -
Yet still I cannot believe
How this could have been.(28)

71

As the bellows blow
Iron will soften and run like water,
But even though the minds of the great,
Those who delight in the one, Arunachala's Lord,
Will melt and dissolve,
Such a thing will be very hard indeed
For those of feeble mind
Who have not cut away the bonds of family and clan.

72

If we hold in our thoughts
The two feet of our father, Lord Arunagiri,
And meditate upon them,
We will obtain liberation,
We will abolish the deep suffering of birth,
We will reach the further shore.

73

I trusted in the words
That our Teacher and Master,
Lord Arunagiri, spoke to us,
Caring little
For our actions' powerful bonds,
Nor reaping the fruits
Of those good and evil deeds,
We shall dwell, my heart,
In the state of bliss.

74

I have seen and I have understood
And now I see no more of actions' fruit;
Henceforth my suffering is at an end,
For in the sacred hall of Aruna's Lord
Whom in ancient times Mal and Vishnu sought in vain,
I have seen him sway to the rhythm of his holy dance.

75

Lord Arunachala whom the moon adorns,
For one such as I
Who has forgotten you
And cherished this lustful body,
I see no means of escape from bondage,
No place where I might take refuge
Unless it is in you.

You who dispel my weakness, Lord of Arunachala,
 Will you not grant me one request,
 To save this wretch from destruction?
 Will you grant that this mind of mine
 That is just like a swing,
 Rushing one way then the other,
 Shall no more pass through the portals of birth?

Lord of Arunachala! I was born,
 As my mother bears witness,
 And I shall die.
 But what can you know of these,
 You who were never born?
 Tell me!

For the ignorant who have not learned
 To merge their thoughts
 With the lotus foot of Arunachala's Lord,
 What good will it do
 To multiply their austerities?
 And what difference will it make
 If they meditate upon holy books,
 Or if they do not?

First One, Arunachala's Lord,
 When will the day come
 That you place your foot of burnished gold
 Upon my sinner's head?
 Listen to me, great king!
 The heart of one who has no thought of self
 Is no different from that of one
 Who joyfully fixes his thoughts upon you.

You have heard how all men extol you,
 Saying that you will grant liberation
 To those who meditate upon you.
 I am one who has sung your praises,
 Eternal Lord of Arunagiri;
 May you grant me this very day
 Your golden foot.

If they are forgetful of him,
 weighed down by a mountain of troubles,

how shall men comprehend
the words of the fiery Mountain Lord
who appeared as a column of flame,
striking fear into the hearts of Mal and Brahma
as they boasted arrogantly, 'I am the Supreme'?

85

Lord of Arunachala,
On whom should I, your devotee,
Fix my thoughts
When deep sorrows beset me?
At what nurturing breast might I seek refuge?
Whom should I think upon
With melting heart?

86

When will the day come, my heart
That you fix yourself at the foot
Of southern Arunachala's Lord
And remain there
Beyond reproach and free of desire,
Like those who have escaped from bondage,
With no desire for gold and jewels,
Free of the troubles of the world.

87

Not knowing the ways of him
Who drank the ocean's poison,
Having no thought in my mind
Of the lotus feet of Arunachala's Lord,
I was born, alas, into the world
And remain there
Bewildered and exhausted.

88

Let him pinch his nostrils,
Let him sprinkle the threefold holy waters, [\(29\)](#)
Let him speak out in ringing tones -
When we consider the matter,
Can there be any profit in all this
For a sinner who does not fix his thoughts
Upon Arunachala's Lord?

89

If I do not trust in the twin feet
Of my father, Arunachala's Lord,
If my thoughts do not turn,
Time and time again, towards him,
What good will it do me to dress in rags?
What benefit shall I derive
From immersing myself in holy waters?

Supreme Lord, all of creation,
 Moveable and immoveable, wanders in vain,
 Offering no obeisance to you. Arunachala's King,
 I have been born,
 And may this be my final birth.
 Take pity on me
 That I may never take birth again.

Could it have been the reward
 For chanting the sacred five syllables
 And giving faithful service to my Guru
 Over many, many lifetimes?
 For now I have seen the golden foot
 Of our refuge, Arunachala's Lord,
 He who does not reveal his foot to all.

The liberation that arises in those devotees
 Whose every thought is beyond reproach
 And who devote themselves to the Lord of Arunachala,
 He who is totally devoid of material form -
 Could it ever be vouchsafed to those fools
 Who are unable to cut off their attachment
 To the three great desires?
 Speak!

Did Brahma possess the great distinction
 Of never entering the door of the womb?
 Or Vishnu, who took on form
 And grew to a great height?
 Or any of the other gods
 Whose sanctity is so great?
 Other than my father and Lord of Arunachala
 Is anyone so great that death cannot touch him?

Supreme Lord of Arunachala,
 The teaching you impart is rare indeed,
 Showing us how we may be spared
 From entering a mother's womb.
 In comparison,
 All the teachings of other good men
 Appear quite commonplace.

You whose breast is adorned
With a great garland of kondrai flowers!
Great Teacher!
You who flourish in your fair abode
Upon noble southern Arunachala!
Who is there who could tell your measure,
If you did not, in joy,
Proffer your golden foot And hold us in your sway?

96

No more shall I endure this illusory body
That is the dwelling place
Of three hundred and sixty maladies.
Lord of Arunachala,
You whose matted locks are adorned
With the waning moon and the River Ganga,
You have abolished birth henceforth
For myself, your devotee.

97

When will the day come that I am delivered
From the torments of 'I' and 'mine'?
You whose glory is everlasting,
Arunachala's King, our mountain refuge
Who stands before us as the essence
Of all that thought can encompass!
When will the day come that I slough off
The bondage of this physical form?

98

Lord of Arunachala,
The true and all-pervading supreme!
Before I breathe my last
May my eyes look upon you
As you come close to me,
And show me your golden foot,
Freeing this wretch from delusion
Through your love.

99

Father Arunachala whom rice fields surround!
May I never leave your presence
And be separated from you.
Free from death
May I magnify your glory
In sweet Tamil hymns.
This much you must grant me.

100

Those steadfast men who think upon
The Lord of Arunagiri's Mount,

He who shares his form with mother Uma,
In whom all virtue flourishes,
Will not be born into the world,
Or if they are born,
Though they forget their true nature,
They will not feel the deadly effects
Of good and evil deeds.

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([28](#)) According to one version of Guhai Namasivaya's life, he had a vision of Siva in the shrine at Kanchipuram, a major Saiva temple to the south-west of Madras.

([29](#)) This is an oblique reference to some of the many purificatory rites that some Hindus perform.

Arunagiri Antadi
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Invocation

When we join our hands in worship of the elephant-headed one,
Son of Lord Arunachala, (1)
Who is anger pierced the lion-headed Vishnu with his beak, (2)
He grants success in deeds and gives forth wisdom,
He brings red-hued Lakshmi to our side, (3)
He inspires devotion to God and confers true knowledge of reality.

1

Lord who stands immanent as the Red Mountain, full of glory, (4)
Unseen by the black cloud of Vishnu and the lotus-born Brahma,
(5)
Who on this fair earth can grasp and speak your greatness,
If you, in compassion, deign not to bestow your grace.

2

Immaculate One who swallowed the poison from the ocean of
milk! (6) Exalted emissary! Holy Guru in the form of the Red
Mountain,
Who delights our eyes and gives us nurture!
To a dog such as I, who never thought
To strew flowers at your feet in the early morning,
You afforded me shelter.

3

Lord who burned up the God of love,
Who bears a bow of sugar cane! (7)
Your pure heart is my only recourse.
Without that, everlasting Lord Sonagiri, (8)
Who ate up the abundant venom,
What salvation then remains for a dog such as I?
Speak!

4

Lord Sonagiri, seat of true knowledge,
Whose glory spreads throughout the world,
Is the one who cuts away the illusion-fraught births
Of those who speak of him!
Immaculate and unapproachable Mountain,(9) look upon me,
And grant that I shall no more take form within a mother's womb.

5

Lord who wears an ornament in his hair,
Red Mountain of fire, without you to watch over me,
Who else is there upon this earth for a dog such as I
To wipe out this very day unceasing birth and close-pursuing
death?

6

Lord of the *Vedas* that impart goodness, venerable Red Mountain,
The First Cause that Vishnu sought!
If you fix your graceful thoughts on me,
Surely the results of my good and evil deeds,
And my soul's three-fold impurity
Will be abolished this very day,
And cease to crush this solitary devotee!

7

O my heart!
If you meditate with love upon the form of the Red Mountain
Lord,
Who drank with relish the poison *hala*,
He, the Supreme One, will dissolve the worldly fetters
That vex you and keep you in thrall.
What cause then is there for you to fear the Lord of death?

8

Monarch who dwells as the Red Mountain,
When I lauded you as the Supreme One,
Worshipping and praising you with melting heart,
When I sought your favour with hands clasped
And tears running down from my eyes,
You granted me my boon, according to my desire.
What I might offer you in return, I cannot see.

9

Exalted Red Mountain, wisdom's very form,
Who thwarted the desire of Daksha who dared oppose him!(10)
You whose locks are intertwined with the holy Ganges!(11)
My desire is to see and know your holy form, giving you my love,
Before my eyes grow dim and weak.

The white ash that he joyfully wears,
 The serpent, the fiery eye,
 And the beautiful necklace, bearing Brahma's severed head:(12)
 Worship these, the sacred emblems of the Red Mountain Lord
 And he, comprehending, will sunder
 The powerful bonds of the deeds that crush and oppress you.

My heart! The Great One whose throat the poison *hala* adorns!
 The Supreme One who in anger consumed with fire the god of
 love! Wearer of the divine form, whose feet the boar sought,
 Calling out his name, but could not see!
 He has come, assuming the bodily shape of the Guru!
 What wonder is this?

Three-eyed One,(13)
 Whom even the primordial *Vedas* cannot know,(14)
 Red Mountain Teacher!
 I know not what austerities I, a poor wretch, can have performed
 That their reward should be to seek you out,
 And sing of your glory.

My heart! By praising the bounteous one
 Who drives away the effects of evil deeds
 That torment perpetually the hearts
 Of those in whose mind there is attachment,
 We have received our boon;
 We have received the fruit that is proper for this human birth;
 We have ceased to be reborn.

When we perceive in our hearts the Red Mountain Master,
 Our boon will be granted,
 Our life will be illuminated by true knowledge,
 Strength, wealth and endurance will be ours.
 Of what worth is the opinion of those who do not thus perceive
 him?

Although the intense suffering of birth and death
 Pursues remorselessly all the variously established life forms,
 What hurt can it do to those
 Who implant in the hearts and meditate upon
 The holy lotus foot of the red-hued Lord?

By virtue of hearing the songs of the three devotees of Lord
Sonagiri, Who establishes the truth in the hearts of devotees,
The huge rock will float on the flood,
The crocodile's jaws will restore the living child,
And dry bones will become a well-formed young girl.(15)

17

Just as the wicked Daksha, whilst conducting his sacrifice,
Lost his own head, of ambrosia-like beauty,
And received in return the head of a goat,
So we have seen that the undertakings of those
Who do not worship the feet of the supreme Mountain Lord,
Will ever come to nothing.

18

When the host of the gods,
Seeing the poison *hala* arise from the ocean of milk,
Trembled with fear and ran to him in great confusion,
Crying aloud for succour,
He stood affording his protection, for all the world to know;
Lord Sonagiri, whose love for his devotees is ever unfailing.

19

While ten million Brahmas are born and die,
A single day passes for Lord Vishnu,
He whose eye is like the glorious lotus flower,
And then Lord Vishnu goes to sleep on the leaf of the banyan tree.
When we consider the matter,
At the merest hint of a smile from Lord Arunachala Siva,
In his compassion,
Ten million Vishnus will be born and die.(16)

20

Most desirable Lord of the Red Mountain,
Who holds in his hand the smiling deer,
Immaculate One, who protects me
As I enter the round of birth and death,
Without you, my only fitting guardian,
Who else is there in the wide world to give succour to a dog such as
I?
Speak!

21

My heart! To speak in praise of the Red Mountain One,
Who takes as his food the poison from the billowy sea,
This is your duty.
Praise him and the reward of his holy foot will be yours.
Disease, old age and death for you will disappear.
You shall reach the shore of birth's ocean.

22

My heart! Fix your thoughts on the Red Mountain Teacher,
Who, if you believe in his grace and praise him daily,
Will take hold of you, desirous for your good, saying,
‘Behold, I am here!’
If you think of him thus, all the painful effects of your actions
Will subside and go away.

23

Except in response to the songs
Sung by the three devotees of Lord Sonagiri,
Who tears out by the roots our painful cycle of births,
Would the crocodile who ate the child spit him out again alive?
Would the rock succeed in floating on the chilly waters?
Would the male palmyra tree yield up fruits?(17)

24

Before my corpse decays; before my eyes grow dark;
Before my teeth rot and fall;
Before the Lord of death, his eye fixed upon my body, comes
hurrying,
Seek out Lord Sonagiri, my heart.
Greet him with praise and walk in his way.

25

Those who prize the prestige of good family
And high learning as their own
Know nothing of how to curb their desire.
Will the works they compose
Reveal the twin-lotus feet of the Red Lord Sonesan?
Will their high-sounding name bring those feet any the closer?

26

Be they of lowly birth, without the advantage of learning,
Unable to practice the virtue of liberality,
It is of no account.
Those who perform *pradakshina* of holy Aruna, the Supreme,
And submit to his rule
Will excel even amongst the most excellent.

27

Those who desire the boons of fame, long life and children,
All praise the Red Mountain Lord.
For those who praise him continually,
Incapable of forgetting him even when asleep,
There is no further birth.

28

I know nothing of the past, nothing of the future, a simpleton!
Why? I do not even know how to compose a song garland.

Even with the aid of your grace,
My mind cannot perceive and speak of
Your manifest qualities and their inner meaning.

29

Lord Sonagiri, who comes mounted upon the white bull
For the true devotee who knows his inner meaning to look upon!
You it was who, perceiving the vanity of Brahma,
Master of the four *Vedas*,
Cut away one of his five jewel-encrusted heads
To keep him from error.

30

Rule, regent of the heavenly host! Exalted Red Mountain!
May they prosper if they can
Those who, although they have seen at his feet
The eye of Vishnu, [\(18\)](#) bearer of the conch,
And in his red hand, of noble fame, the head of Brahma,
Still deny his supremacy in their words and thoughts.

31

The Supreme One, whose meaning the great unattainable *Vedas*
seek,
Red Mountain, the First Cause whom the hosts of holy men praise,
He will surely come,
Wearing the necklace with the severed head and mounted on the
bull
To unite his being with ours amidst our worldly sorrows.

32

Lord Sonagiri, who rules over us,
When will you grant your grace in answer to my plea,
So that I may behold that beautiful form,
When you and Goddess Uma, who shares your being,
Are seated joyfully side by side. [\(19\)](#)

33

For those who have no faith
In the holy feet of the Red Mountain Lord,
Of what use is it to go off wandering
Among the forests, mountains and caves,
To consume various life-prolonging potions,
Or to take an untimely death?

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Photo of Arunachala, courtesy Dev Gogoi

[\(1\)](#) The invocatory verse, as is usual with all invocations of this kind, is addressed to Ganesh, the elephant-headed god who is the son of Siva.

[\(2\)](#) One of Vishnu's *avatars* was as Narasimha, a half-man and half-lion form.

Narasimha disembowelled the demon Hiranyakasipu, who had harassed the gods. After the demon had been killed, Narasimha was still full of anger and threatened to annihilate the whole universe. Siva appeared in the form of Simbul (in Sanskrit he is known as Sarabha), an eight-legged flying creature. This 'bird' attacked Narasimha, lifted him off the ground and killed him. Siva subsequently wore the skin of Narasimha as an item of clothing.

(3) Lakshmi is the consort of Vishnu and the goddess of prosperity. This portion of the verse is saying that Ganesh grants success and wisdom and also brings about worldly wealth.

(4) Aruna means 'red' and *achala* is Sanskrit for 'mountain'. There are also other names for Arunachala that can be translated as 'Red Mountain'.

(5) The black cloud is one of the epithets of Vishnu. He is traditionally held to be black or dark blue in colour. Brahma originated from a lotus that appeared in Vishnu's navel.

The principal *puranic* story about Arunachala features a dispute between Brahma and Vishnu over which of them is the greater. Siva witnessed their dispute and decided to teach them a lesson in humility. He appeared before them in the form of an infinitely long column of light (some versions say fire) and announced that whichever of the two could find the end of this column could call himself the greater. Vishnu took the form of a boar and burrowed downwards to find the bottom end, while Brahma took the form of a swan and flew upward in search of the top. Neither extremity was found even though the two gods spent thousands of years trying. Both returned unsuccessful, finally conceding that Siva was greater than either of them. Vishnu then requested Siva to manifest in a form that was less dazzling to the eyes so that devotees through the ages could have *darshan* of his form. Siva obliged by condensing himself into the mountain of Arunachala. Thus, for devotees of Arunachala, the mountain is not merely a symbol of Siva or the place where he resides, it is Siva himself, manifesting in a physical form.

(6) After a long period of animosity the *devas* and the *asuras*, the inhabitants of the spirit realms, agreed to cooperate to churn the ocean of milk to obtain *amrita*, the elixir of immortality. At some point during the churning a burning mass of poison appeared whose fumes began to asphyxiate the whole world. At Brahma's request Siva swallowed the poison (*hala*, or *halahala*) and held it in his throat. This poison left a blue mark on Siva's throat, earning him one of his many titles - Nilakantha, which means 'blue-throated'.

(7) Kama, the god of lust, was employed by Indra to make Siva fall in love with Parvati. When he fired one of his arrows from his sugarcane bow at Siva's heart, Siva responded by burning him to ashes with a ray that was emitted from his third eye.

(8) Sonagiri also means 'Red Mountain'.

(9) Annamalai, the Tamil name for Arunachala can be translated as 'unreachable or unapproachable mountain,' probably a reference to the story in which Brahma and Vishnu were unable to find the limits of Siva's column of light.

(10) Daksha was the father of Sati, who was the wife and consort of Siva in the birth before she became Parvati. In that birth she was also known as Uma. Brahma thought that the business of creation could not proceed properly unless Siva married, so he persuaded Daksha to have a daughter who would attract Siva by the power of her yogic *tapas*. The mother-goddess of the universe took the form of Sati and promised that she would go through with this arrangement, but added that if Daksha ever showed her a lack of respect, she would abandon her side of the bargain.

Sati won Siva by the power of her love and asceticism and they were eventually married. Many years later Daksha organised a sacrifice to which he invited all the gods except Siva. Some versions of the story say that Siva did not show Daksha proper respect at an earlier sacrifice, so was not invited again. Another explanation was that Daksha disliked Siva for his wild lifestyle and for the fact that he had once severed one of Brahma's heads, and still carried the skull around with him. Brahma was Daksha's father.

Sati went alone to the sacrifice and discovered that no portion of the offerings had been allocated to Siva. Daksha treated her very disrespectfully, saying that she should not have come to the sacrifice at all. Sati reminded him of the condition of her incarnation - that she would end it if Daksha ever treated her badly. Sati then sat down and self-immolated, burning her body to ashes in a yogic fire that she manifested inside herself.

When Siva heard the news, he vowed revenge. He tore out a clump of his hair and threw it against a mountain, where it turned into Virabhadra and Mahakali. Virabhadra was ordered by Siva to go to the sacrifice and take revenge. He went there with a great army, killed Daksha and many others present, and evicted all the gods who had come to attend. Daksha's head was thrown in to the sacrificial fire. Finally, Virabhadra placed a severed goat's head on the body of Daksha and reanimated it.

Sati reincarnated as Parvati and eventually, after a period of extreme *tapas*, married Siva again and became united with his physical form.

(11) Siva is always depicted with the Ganges emerging from his head. The Ganges is the embodiment of the goddess Ganga who agreed to flow on earth to wash away the sins of people who bathed in her. Starting in heaven, she flows down to earth, where the force of her waters is initially absorbed by Siva's head. It is said that the earth could not otherwise bear the full impact of the descent.

(12) Siva once severed one of Brahma's five heads for an act of sexual impropriety, leaving him with four. After the event, Siva threaded the skull on his necklace. There is an alternative version of the story in which Siva severed the head because Brahma was arrogantly proclaiming that he was the supreme deity. In this version Brahma curses Siva, saying that he has to keep the skull in his hands and use it as a begging bowl.

(13) The two normal eyes of Siva represent the sun and the moon. The third, in the centre of the forehead, symbolises fire. The eyes together represent the three sources of light that illumine the earth, space and the sky. Through his three eyes Siva can see past, present and future, an accomplishment which, as Guhai Namasivaya points out elsewhere, enables him to transcend time. The central eye is the eye of higher perception. Normally it is directed inwards, but when it is turned outwards, it burns all that appears before it.

(14) 'The four *Vedas*' is occasionally used as an epithet of Brahma. When this phrase occurs in the context of not being able to reach Siva, it is a reference to the attempts of Brahma and Vishnu to find the end of Siva's column of light.

(15) The three devotees are Tirunavukkarasar (also known affectionately as 'Appar'), Sundaramurti and Jnanasambandar. Miraculous things happened to all three of them when they sang songs to Siva.

Appar was originally a Jain, but when he converted to Saivism he attracted the ire of the local king and his Jain supporters. Appar was sentenced to death and put into a burning lime kiln for seven days. He sang songs in praise of Siva for the whole week and escaped unburned. Next, the Jains tried to poison him, but Siva turned the poison into nectar. In the third attempt at execution Appar was tied to the ground while an elephant was ordered to trample him to death. As a result of a song Appar sang to Siva, the elephant approached and prostrated to him. Finally, the king ordered Appar to be tied to a huge rock and thrown into the sea. This is the story alluded to in the verse. The rock floated and took Appar away to safety in a neighbouring kingdom.

The crocodile miracle comes from the story of Sundaramurti. Two brahmin boys went for a bathe in a tank. One was eaten by a crocodile and one escaped. Sundaramurti came to the town and heard two different sounds coming from two houses. In one (the house of the boy who had escaped) there were the ritual sounds of a brahmin boy being invested with his sacred thread. From the other house, only sounds of wailing could be heard. Sundaramurti made enquiries and found out what had happened. He sang a song to Siva, asking him to bring the boy back to life. Siva went into the crocodile's stomach and reconstituted the boy. Yama, the god of death, released his soul and the crocodile vomited him up. Sundaramurti then performed the thread ceremony of the boy.

The third story is about Sivanesan and his daughter Poompavai. The father thought that Jnanasambandar would be a suitable husband for his daughter and mentally offered her to him. Poompavai, though, was bitten by a snake and died.

Sivanesan offered a large sum of money to anyone who could resurrect his daughter, but no one came forward. The body was cremated and the ashes were put into a pot. Every day Sivanesan decorated the pot with flowers and thought of Jnanasambandhar. Sivanesan eventually went to meet Jnanasambandar, who had already heard about Poompavai and the pot from another source. Jnanasambandhar sang a song to Siva, asking him to restore the girl to life. Poompavai came back as a twelve-year-old girl. Sivanesan asked Jnanasambandar to marry her, but Jnanasambandhar declined, saying that when Sivanesan had offered the girl to him, that was in her previous form in her old body. In her new form, said Jnanasambandhar, he would only regard her as his daughter.

All three stories can be found in the *Periyapuranam*, the 1000-year-old anthology of the lives of sixty-three Saiva saints.

(16) According to one of Hinduism's creation myths, the universe began with Mahavishnu lying on a banyan leaf in the shape of a baby. Vishnu then began to think, 'Who am I? Who created me?' In response to these queries the Supreme *Sakti* (the female divine energy) manifested in a personified form and explained the process to him. The *trimurtis* (Brahma, Vishnu and Siva) would be responsible respectively for the creation, sustenance and dissolution of the universe each time it came into existence. Brahma, Vishnu was told, would appear from a lotus that would manifest in Vishnu's navel.

Hindu cosmology is cyclical. The universe periodically comes into being and then withdraws into nothingness again. The periodic disappearance of the universe is known as *pralaya*, or cosmic dissolution. Even the gods are dissolved at the time of *pralaya*. The universe has manifested innumerable times, and each time it has appeared a new set of *trimurtis* has regulated its functioning.

The Siva that Guhai Namasivaya is speaking of here is the transcendent Absolute, not one of the perishable *trimurtis*. From this position of transcendence Siva can witness millions of the other gods being born and dying without aging himself. This transcendent Siva is not subject to dissolution at the time of *pralaya*.

(17) Except for the last line, these are the same miracles that were explained in footnote fifteen. The additional story concerns Jnanasambandhar.

While he was visiting Tiruvotthur he met a devotee who told him, 'I have planted many palmyra trees in my garden, but all of them turned out to be male trees, and they are not yielding fruit. The Jains are mocking me for this.'

Jnanasambandhar went to the local temple and sang a song that mentioned the devotee's plight. All the trees turned into females and gave fruits. Some of the previously mocking Jains were so impressed, they converted to Saivism.

(18) Vishnu was once performing a *sahasranama* to Siva's feet. In this form of worship one chants the thousand names of the deity, making an offering as each name is chanted. When Vishnu reached 999, he ran out of flowers. Not wanting the puja to be spoiled, he gave one of his eyes as the final offering.

(19) Uma is one of the many names of Parvati, the consort of Siva.

In *Arunachala Mahatmyam* and *Arunachala Puranam*, Uma, known locally as Unnamulai, unites with Siva to such an extent that each shares the other's form. Unnamulai means, 'She whose breasts have never been suckled'. Traditionally, Siva and Unnamulai appear as a half-male and half-female figure, the left side being Unnamulai and the right side Siva. In this merged or unified state Unnamulai becomes Siva's *sakti*, the divine energy which brings into existence all manifestation. Iconographical representations of their combined form, which is known as Ardhanariswara, show a half-male and half-female body, with the dividing line being the vertical axis running down the middle of the body. Uma (Unnamulai) earned the right to this union by performing intense *tapas* over two lifetimes, the first as Sati, and the second as Parvati.

Arunagiri Antadi

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34

Those who have seen the holy feet of the Red Mountain Lord,
The foremost one, whose body blazes with the fire of true
knowledge, The refuge unattainable both to the boar, who sought
his two feet,
And to the swan who sought his glorious crown,
They will never again enter the womb.

35

Supreme Lord, who stands beyond the reach
Of him who is like a black cloud and of lotus-borne Brahma,
Great One who rides the bull!
For those who praise the devotees of the royal Lord Sonagiri
Who bears aloft the incomparable deer and axe,
What sorrow can there be?

36

The thought of reaching the lotus foot of the Red Mountain Lord
Praised by all those who have practised great austerities,
Can it arise in a dog such as I,
Languishing daily, as I am, in the sorrowful unending cycle of
births?
Speak!

37

Father Sonagiri, whose greatness is such that it cannot be spoken,
And even the thoughts of Mal (20) and Brahma cannot encompass
it!
Grant that the surpassing beauty of yourself,
Joined in indissoluble union with your bride,
Will never fade and recede from my sight.

38

Unapproachable Red Mountain Lord,
Whom even the dwellers in heaven praise!
When I, enquiring with bold confidence,
Look upon the lotus flowers of your two feet.
Which neither Hari nor Brahma could perceive,
The mind of this poor beggar will be destroyed.

39

To the bestower of wealth who destroyed the three cities(21)
To assuage the mental turmoil of the great *rishis*!
To the protector who cut off the head of Daksha,
Who was born of Brahma, through his grace!
To the Red Mountain Lord!
Look to him, O my heart, for your salvation.

40

My heart, place your trust each day in that truth
That was fully proclaimed by the king of heaven,
The Red Mountain Lord.
Whether he brings ruin upon our heads,
Or whether he lifts us up through his grace,
Repeat the name of Lord Sonesan and believe in his word.

41

Unique One, giver of goodness, Lord Sonagiri!
He whose beautiful form is seated upon the bull!
When will you grant me the boon of eternal life,
At what time shall I, in joy, obtain it?
This much tell to me, your solitary devotee, this very day!

42

Taking a necklace of *rudraksha* beads,
Whose nature is suited to solitude,
Recite the five letters(22) with full voice, one by one,
Mindful of their meaning.
Thus, earnestly seeking the feet of Lord Sonagiri,
Whose ornament is the snake,(23)
We shall obtain the boon of freedom from death for all eternity.

43

Those human souls who know nothing of the devotees of the
Eternal Red Mountain Lord,
Who lays down the path that we must follow,
They have no thought for the fruits of their actions,
No thought for the results of their good and evil deeds.
They are ignorant of the worship that is fitting for Lord Siva.

44

Bounteous one, Lord Sonagiri!

Though men are one in their physical form,
Why have you thus ordained it
That some live according to their desire,
Whilst others must cover their mouths,
And fold their arms in humble obeisance?

45

All the worlds are his possession;
That which moves all beings is his own movement.
He is father to all, and protector of all living things,
The Red Mountain Lord.
The mental suffering of those who speak of him
Will die away and disappear.

46

My heart! If you desire that medicine
Which is needed to cure the deep suffering
Of wandering from birth to death,
Pay no heed to the empty words of those that mock,
And speak but once the name of the Red Mountain Lord.

47

My heart! Being ever mindful of the lotus foot of him,
Who, out of his love for us,
Wears the invincible poison as an ornament at his throat,
Stand firmly fixed in the exalted worship of Lord Siva,
Believing in accordance with the injunctions of the four *Vedas*,
Whose meaning is hard to speak.

48

Unapproachable Red Mountain Father,
Who stands immanent as my place of refuge,
When it is time for my painful struggles in the ocean of births to
end,
You must come.
For when I reflect, there is no other like you to help a dog such as
I.

49

My heart! Hold tightly to the feet of the Red Mountain Lord,
The pure one, who wears flowers and the crescent moon
Entwined in his hair,
And who shares his being with her who gave birth to the world.
If you do thus, death himself will fear to approach you.

50

His front foot deals out death to the Lord of the dead.(24)
On his back foot the eye of Vishnu is ever displayed.
In his hand, of noble fame, he bears the head of Brahma.
He is the unapproachable Red Mountain Lord.

If anyone knows the equal of his ruddy shoulders' might,
Let him speak!

51

Effulgent light, difficult to describe! Sonagiri Father!
For those who do not take as the ultimate truth
Your advent upon this earth in the form of the Guru,
Everything they discover and learn will be in vain.
However many worthy books they study,
What good will come of it?

52

For those who choose not to follow
The path that leads to the lotus foot of the Red Mountain Lord,
Who joyfully wears at his throat the poison from the ocean of milk,
Will the ancient fetters of their former actions be sundered by
learning?
Though nobly born, will their birth be any the less painful?

53

My foolish heart! Recite the five-lettered name of the First One,
The Red Mountain Lord, and mediate upon it.
Thus will the straight path, the steadfast condition,
And the marks of true knowledge become manifest to you.
Your every wish will be granted, and fulfilment will be yours.

54

A mind we have with which to think of him
And a tongue with which to speak.
For study, we have many Saiva *Agamas*.
But when we wish to worship the two feet of Lord Sonagiri,
That even the primordial *Vedas* cannot reach,
Our sins rise up high and block our way.

55

King of kings and greatest among the great!
Lord Sonagiri, whose glory is dear to our hearts!
You who ate the poison that the celestials, in fear, could not
overcome!
There are those who number you as an equal among the gods.
How can this be?

56

Those who give no alms and know not how to speak soft words,
Those who do not describe him as:
'The one who in ancient times
Burned down the three cities of his enemies,
And at whose side sits Goddess Unnamulai.'
Those who wear not the holy ash,
What birth might they expect upon this earth?

57

I did not wear the holy ash
Nor did I think lovingly upon the five letters, and speak them out.
Yet did he not take upon himself the burden
Of making me his slave.
Wise Lord Sonagiri, he who wears the holy river in his matted
locks,
And whose hand clasps the victorious axe.

58

Red Mountain Lord! My sin is that of failing
To diligently mediate upon your five-lettered name,
The seed that develops into the path of higher knowledge.
My recompense is to be born in a hellish birth,
And having been born, to die again.

59

My heart! Why do you keep on, day and night, mortifying your
body?
By seeking refuge in Lord Sonagiri,
Our Father who delights in the deer,
The painful effect of our good and evil deeds will disappear.
If we fill our minds with thoughts of him,
What further need we do?

60

Unless we follow the command of the Red Mountain Lord,
What other task is there for us to do?
Although we may torture our minds through and through with
Thoughts and speculation,
Can we thereby attain in fullness to that greater life?
Can our mind fulfil our deepest yearning
By virtue of its own power.

61

Sonagiri Father! You who ride upon the bull!
You it is who are the goal of my austerities, and their fruit.
You are both father and mother to me.
And you it is who will draw me to the shelter to your holy feet,
So difficult to describe.

62

For those who, whilst living upon this earth,
Do not hold in their hearts
The thought of the five-faced one, Lord Sonagiri,
What is the good of going off to bathe in a thousand holy rivers,
Famed for granting the wishes of the righteous?
Even if they offer as many as sixteen charitable gifts on those
banks, What is the use of it?

My heart! You did not steadfastly practice austerities
 Nor did you go to the temple
 To perform *puja* and meritorious deeds in the name of Lord Siva.
 Is it thus, without any effort, that you hope to reach
 The lotus foot of the Father who grants victory,
 The universal doer, the Red Mountain Lord?
 Speak!

My Heart! Neither Vishnu himself nor Brahma
 Could perceive the foot of the Red Mountain Lord.
 Can it then be reached so effortlessly?
 What will you gain if you remain idle, merely recounting tales
 about him,
 If he does not, in fitting manner, bestow his graceful thoughts upon
 you?

He who knocked out the teeth of the sun god! (25)
 Father of mighty Virabhadra, who on that day
 Tore off the nose of the goddess Devi,
 Wife to the lotus-dwelling Brahma! (26)
 He who is pleased to wear the crescent moon in his hair,
 And who bears aloft the whitened skull of Brahma!
 He, the Red Mountain Lord, will be here this very day.

Lord of the Red Mountain in whose wild locks the crescent moon
 Is entwined among kondrai, punnai and erukku flowers!
 When will they leave me,
 The time-bound sorrows of past, present and future?
 These thoughts indeed oppress me.

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(20) One of the names of Vishnu, as is Hari in the following verse.

(21) At a time when the *devas* and the *asuras* were having one of their many wars, the three cities of the *asuras* were protected by a boon which specified that they could only be destroyed by one shot of a single arrow. When the *devas* were on the point of finally losing, they appealed to Siva and he obliged them by destroying all the *asura* cities with a single shot.

(22) *Na, Ma, Si, Va, and Ya*, which comprise *Nama Sivaya*, meaning 'Obeisance to Siva'.

(23) There is a *puranic* story in which Siva appeared before some *rishis* in the guise of a beggar. Through his power he caused the *rishi*'s wives to fall in love with him. The *rishis*, angered by his behaviour, decided to kill him. They dug a pit, out of which emerged a tiger. Siva killed it and wore its skin. Later snakes came out of the pit, but they had no effect on Siva. He wound them around his body and used them as ornaments. Because of this incident Siva is almost always

depicted as having at least one poisonous snake wrapped around his body.

(24) A reference to the story Markandeya, a sixteen-year-old who, with Siva's help, managed to avoid his predestined death.

Mrikanda, Markandeya's father had prayed to Siva to get a son. Siva appeared before him and said, 'Do you desire to have a virtuous, wise and pious son who will only live to be sixteen, or a dull-witted, evil-natured son who will live for a long time.'

Mrikanda opted for the short-lived son, who turned out to be a child-sage. On the day of his appointed death, Yama came to collect him. Markandeya cried out to Siva for help and embraced the idol of Siva that he usually meditated on. Yama threw his rope and lassoed the idol as well as Markandeya. This angered Siva, who came roaring down from the heavens, after which he killed Yama with a single blow of his foot. Siva then gave Markandeya a boon that he could be sixteen forever, and thus avoid death, and he also restored Yama's life.

(25) After Siva had cut off Brahma's head, Brahma cursed him, saying that he would always have to beg for his food, using the skull as a begging bowl. This made Siva very angry, so he went on the rampage, killing thousands of *devas* in the process. At one point Surya, the sun god, confronted him and tried to make him stop. Siva hit him in the face and knocked out all his teeth. When Siva's anger had subsided, he restored them all.

(26) As Virabhadra was driving out the gods and the sages from Daksha's sacrifice, he cut off Devi's nose. See note ten for more details of Daksha's sacrifice.



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67

I have perceived the means of dissolving away
All the manifold maladies and sufferings
That beset my life unendingly, and crush me down.
I have taken into my heart the lotus foot of the Red Mountain Lord.
What then do I lack?

68

Nothing do we lack when we speak of him.
Professing our undying devotion to the ruler of the heavenly host,
We have taken refuge in him.
The king of the dead is powerless to pursue and take hold of us.
When we consider, my heart,
Ours is the victory over the spear that Yama (27) flourishes in his
hand.

69

The gods themselves who dwell on high
Performed *puja* and virtuous deeds at the lotus foot
Of the immaculate one, who drank the poison from the ocean of
milk,
The Red Mountain Lord,
Whose breast is adorned with garlands of flowers.
And so doing did they cleave to the path that leads to all goodness.

70

That all beings must undergo birth and death, this we clearly know
Through the works of the masters of Tamil poetry.
That Lord Sonesan took birth in some dwelling,
This we have not heard.
Neither have we heard that he lived upon this wide earth,
Enjoyed its pleasure, and then passed away.(28)

Those who do not praise and strew beautiful flowers
 At the feet of the devotees of Lord Sonagiri
 Who abides in supreme bliss,
 They will live each day in fear of the cruel Lord of death,
 Who stalks them like a vengeful huntsman.

Exalted Lord Sonagiri spoke to me,
 Desolate and weak as I was, through fear of cruel death,
 Saying: 'Do not be afraid!'
 You who came as my Guru, in a form my heart could know,
 And enslaved me,
 The austerities of those who know you not,
 They will be like earth heaped around the roots of a tree already
 dead.

Red Mountain Lord, he who cannot be numbered among those gods
 Who are born upon this earth, die, and are destroyed!
 I have but one request:
 It is that I, your devotee, should never be parted from you.
 May you grant me this.

Sovereign Lord who burnt the three cities of his foes!
 You whose visible form is known as Aruneshan!([29](#))
 Having taken the form of my Guru,
 Abolished the effects of my former deeds,
 And raised me up to the estate of true reality,
 May you grant me finally the grace of your two feet!

Lord Sonagiri! Performer of virtuous deeds,
 Who, by drinking that poison, banished the fear of so many gods!
 You it is who lift me up and protect me,
 You it is who embrace me, and grant that I may embrace you,
 And you it is who guard me from suffering.
 May you look upon me this very moment.

When shall I cease to reject, and begin to feel compassion for
 Those who entreat you, saying that for them
 There is no today and no tomorrow?
 When shall I reach the stage of offering them thrice-daily worship?
 When shall I, fixing my thoughts on the immaculate one,
 Lord Sonagiri, take him into my heart?

I have not thought of you.
Standing in the temple, I have not drenched my body
With tears streaming down from my eyes.
I have not sought the means of cutting through the bonds of birth.
Nor, praising you, Red Mountain Lord,
Have I adorned your beautiful feet
With garlands of flowers.
In the time to come, who will there be here to help me?

78

When we reflect, neither good nor evil can befall us
Without the knowledge of the great one, who bears a thousand
names,
The unfathomable beatitude, Lord Sonagiri.
Be still then, my heart!
Knowing that all is in him.

79

The peerless five letters of our Lord of the Red Mountain,
The Supreme One who affords shelter to all living things,
Are they not a fitting remedy
To remove the effects of the good and evil deeds
Of those who keep their minds fixed steadfastly on him,
And to dispel their soul's poverty in this very birth?

80

'He it is who once cut off one of my five heads.
Today he could easily cut off the remaining four.'
Thus reflecting to himself will Brahma,
Fearing those who chant the sacred five letters,
Erase from their foreheads the marks of destiny.(30)

81

Always does the Lord of death
Summon his messengers to him in a fitting manner,
And stand before them advising them thus:
'To those who have devoted themselves this day
To the worship of Lord Sonagiri, the Eternal One,
You should offer reverential greetings, and depart from there.'

82

For those who worship his beautiful foot,
The Red Mountain Lord, bestower of wisdom,
Will inspire devotion, impart true knowledge,
And confer final liberation.
Therefore take to yourself and praise the five letters
That dispel the evil effects of our deeds,
So difficult to allay.

83

Auspicious One! Wearer of the Ganges! Red Mountain Lord!
However you should wish to adorn yourself,
There are jewels and pearls most fitting,
And bright gold in abundance in which to set them.
But you, taking none of these, choose to bedeck yourself
With bones, an elephant's hide, (31) and a rearing serpent.
Why is it so?

84

Wearer of the Ganges!
When will you lovingly summon me to your presence,
Mean wretch that I am?
When will you test our love, O Red Mountain Lord?
And having tested it, when will you set us upon the supreme path?
Speak!

85

Taking into my heart as my Guru
The Red Mountain Lord, who now stands formless before me,
I have put to flight
The results of my good and evil deeds, impossible to describe,
My soul's threefold impurity
And my unparalleled suffering.

86

Exalted Red Mountain Lord! Regent of the heavenly host
Who abides in the hearts of those
Who never for an instant fall away from the path they have chosen!
The hearts of those who worship you
Will never slip back to their former state,
Nor, as a result of their good and evil deeds,
Will they ever become embroiled in the sevenfold round of births.

87

Except for the ineffable Lord Annamalai
And his consort Unnamulai, who sits at his Lordship's side,
I have known no other gods,
Or if I have know them,
I have never cherished them in my heart of hearts.

88

Except for those who in previous births
Thought of you with melting heart,
And meditated upon the Red Mountain Lord,
Will it be easy for anyone upon this earth
To witness in this lifetime your sacred dance,
Whose praises men of virtue sing?

89

For those who are without love for the Red Mountain Lord,

Who cleaves away falsehood and subjects us to his rule,
Will it be of any benefit to mortify the body?
Will our earthly bonds be severed by reciting weighty tomes?
Can a snake be killed simply by striking the termite hill in which it
lives?

90

Lord who takes the holy form of the Red Mountain,
You have so ordained it upon this earth
That our bodies, which fill us with desire
And which we cherish as our own possession,
Will soon be claimed as carrion by the jackals.
Even knowing this, I have not curbed my desires,
I have not conquered my soul's thirst for the three impurities,
I have not come to know your greatness.

91

Virtuous one whom Vishnu could not see!
Lord Sonagiri who bears an eye on his forehead!
He who remains invisible even to the knowledge-giving *Vedas*!
I was born a poor wretch, spurning your holy feet,
And in pain do I wear this body,
Which is no better than a packet of rice to feed the jackals.

92

Lord Sonagiri by whose grace all virtue flourishes!
Paying homage to yourself, who were never born and can never die,
And to those whom you have made your slaves,
I did not honour the corruptible bodies
Of those gods who suffer birth and death.

93

Munificent Lord Sonagiri! For the sake of the gods,
You destroyed the three cities of the *asuras*,
And joyfully swallowed the poison from the ocean of milk.
Why is it then, that when Vishnu himself in the form of the boar
Desired to reach your lotus foot,
You stood as an unfathomable pillar of fire?

94

Eternal One who joyfully ate the poison from the ocean's depths!
Untasted ambrosia! Lord Sonagiri, my Master!
Father who rules over the earth!
For a wretch such as I, who wander aimlessly,
Knowing nothing of *puja* and meritorious deeds,
Who else is there to help me?

95

Red Mountain Lord who gives me support and sustenance!

To raise me up, protect me,
And deliver me from the suffering of birth and death,
You are the straight path.
Other than you, there is no one else to help me.

96

Immaculate One who wears the holy river in his matted locks!
Righteous One who grants upon this earth
All entreaties that are not uttered in falsehood!
When I reflect, Lord Sonagiri, abode of compassion!
Except for you, who else is there to break this long chain of births?

97

You who are compassion's abode!
In my final hours, as death approaches,
I shall not be able to worship your holy foot,
I shall not be able to call out to you, crying 'Red Mountain Lord!'
My mind will be unable to think of you,
And my eyes incapable of discerning your form,
And fixing their gaze upon it.

98

Unapproachable Red Mountain Lord,
Whom, though they sought him long,
Even the four *Vedas* could not find!
I did not meditate upon your two feet.
I knew nothing of how to address you;
To those who suffered, nothing did I give.
I am a poor wretch.
My heart will stay as it is, O Lord, and meets its ruin.

99

My Lord! The dance of a wooden puppet,
Is it a skill learned by the puppet itself?
Or is it due simply to the manipulation of the puppeteer?
Is my arduous fate of my own choosing,
Or is it by your will alone,
You who made me and watch over me?
Speak, O Red Mountain Lord!

100

Our Father, the Red Mountain Lord,
Who destroyed the three cities of those that did not honour him!
Like a great cloud of nectar he will come,
And pour forth a flood of bliss upon this earth,
That the living crop in the hearts of those devotees who call out to
him, May not become parched and dry.

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(27) Yama is the Hindu god of death.

(28) Saivas make a point of stressing that Siva, unlike Vishnu, has never been born on earth. He manifests, rather than incarnates, whenever the need arises.

(29) Another name of Arunachala, meaning Lord Aruna.

(30) It is a traditional belief in India that one's destiny in this life is written on the forehead by Brahma. Those who chant the five holy letters, '*Nama Sivaya*', and reach the feet of Siva free themselves from their destiny.

(31) The elephant Gajasura was a demon who could not control his sensory indulgences. Siva pierced him with his trident. As he was dying, Gajasura asked Siva for a boon, and Siva agreed. The boon was that Siva should wear Gajasura's flayed hide as an ornament.

Guru Namasivaya

(Parts of this article were first published in *The Mountain Path*,
1992, pp. 13-22)
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In the account of [Guhai Namasivaya](#)'s life that I gave on this site it was mentioned that in the period of his life when he was living on the hill, he began to attract disciples and teach them. The most eminent and well known of these disciples was a man who later became known as Guru Namasivaya.

There is no available information about the early part of their relationship, for even the most detailed accounts of his life begin at a point where Guru Namasivaya is manifesting *siddhis* (supernatural powers) and nearing the day of his spiritual liberation.

As the story begins both Namasivayas are living together on the hill. Guhai Namasivaya is lying in his hammock, his favourite resting place, absorbed in the Self. Guru Namasivaya is nearby, doing service to him. Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, Guru Namasivaya bursts out laughing.

'Namasivaya,' asked his Guru, 'What wonder did you see that made you laugh?'

The disciple first responded by reminding his Guru of their relationship.

'When I offered you my body, my possessions and my soul, you, my Lord, accepted them all, having a wish to take over this slave.'

Then he went on to explain what had caused him such amusement.

'At Tiruvarur [a temple town located a long way from Tiruvannamalai] Tyagaraja Swami [a local deity] was being taken in procession through the streets. Many women dancers, so skilled that they cannot be equalled by *apsaras* [dancers from the heavenly realms], were accompanying it and dancing. One of these women stumbled and fell. All those who were standing there laughed. I too laughed. That is all. There was nothing else.'

This same ability manifested sometime later when Guhai Namasivaya noticed that his disciple had just rubbed the cloth he wore around his shoulders in a strange way.

'For what reason did you rub it?' he asked.



Guhai Namasivaya
(Click on the image to
enlarge)



*The gopuram over the
entrance to the Guhai
Namasivaya Temple*
(Click on the image to
enlarge)

The disciple answered, 'The Golden Dancing Hall at Chidambaram was screened with a black screen. The wick of a ghee lamp was burning nearby. A mouse took the burning wick, dragged it along, causing a curtain to catch fire. Those who were present vigorously smothered the burning curtain. Swami, I too rubbed my cloth so that the curtain would not burn any more.'

Guhai Namasivaya knew from these incidents and from his own direct knowledge that his disciple had reached an advanced stage of his *sadhana*, but he also knew that *siddhis* such as those just described are no real indication of spiritual progress. He therefore decided to test his disciple's level of devotion. He vomited, caught the vomit in his begging bowl, and then ordered his disciple to dispose of it in a place where it would not come into contact with human feet. This disciple's love for his Guru was so great, he took the vomit to be *prasad* and secretly ate it.

Guhai Namasivaya affected not to know what his disciple had done. Later, he asked him ingenuously, 'Appa Namasivaya, did you leave it in a place where feet could not touch it?'

The disciple bowed his head and confirmed that he had taken it to be *prasad*. 'I have kept it in a place where it ought to be kept,' he answered.

Seeing the powers his disciple was developing, and noting the extent of his devotion, Guhai Namasivaya thought to himself, 'Day by day my disciple's knowledge is increasing. He should not be kept here any more. Let me test him one more time, and then I can send him to a place that will be appropriate for him.'

Guhai Namasivaya, an accomplished extempore poet, then composed the first two lines of a *venba* verse and chanted them to his disciple:

The fruiting banyan provides fruit for the birds,

The bamboo when it matures is not without its use

Then, addressing his disciple, he said, 'Appa Namasivaya(1), you can complete the remainder of this *venba* for me'.

The disciple immediately realised that he was being tested. He examined the words of his Guru and decided that the banyan tree signified Guhai Namasivaya and that the bamboo was a reference to himself. The fruit of the banyan was therefore the grace of the Guru that was made available to all devotees who came to him. Extending the analogy, the disciple found that the second line contained what were, for him, ominous words. It seemed to be saying, 'Since you have attained spiritual maturity, you too can be useful to devotees who seek the grace of the Guru'. Namasivaya was very much attached to the physical form of his Guru and wanted only to stay with him and serve him. The idea of abandoning this simple and satisfying relationship did not appeal to him. However, being a fully surrendered devotee, he felt no inclination to dispute the words and decision of his Guru.

So, when Guhai Namasivaya asked him to complete the verse, he merely replied, 'Swami, the disciple should not bandy words with the Guru. This is not proper conduct for the disciple.'

Guhai Namasivaya then gave him the freedom to express his own views by saying, 'Son, since you are knowledge itself, you may speak'.

The disciple then expressed this fear of being sent away by completing the verse in the following way:

My Lord Namasivaya, would you consent to keep

company with one who refrains from performing great and wondrous deeds?

The disciple realised that his display of *siddhis* and his extreme devotion in swallowing the vomit had triggered Guhai Namasivaya's test. His answer therefore took the form of a simple plea: 'If I stop manifesting *siddhis* and refrain from exaggerated acts of devotion, will you permit me to continue staying with you?'

Guhai Namasivaya was delighted with the way that his disciple handled the test.

He climbed down from his hammock and exclaimed, 'Appa! Pupil of my two eyes! Only today did you attain true knowledge! What a wonder! Who will ever get a disciple like you? From today you may use the title "Guru Namasivayamurti".'

His pleasure, though, did not cause him to change his decision to send his disciple away. Embracing his disciple he continued, 'Two elephants should not be tied to the same post. This is a *bhoga kshetra* [see the explanation given below]. There is a divine *kshetra* [holy place] called Chidambaram where Ambalanavar, [the God] who removes ignorance and grants true knowledge, has graciously manifested. You have some renovation and endowment work at that place. So, go and live there.'

Bhoga means enjoyment or pleasure and is generally associated with physical or sensory indulgence. A *kshetra* is a holy place. So, a *bhoga kshetra* can be literally translated as 'a holy place for the enjoyment of physical pleasure'. Since this is a strange and inappropriate designation for a sacred site such as Arunachala, one should look for alternative translations and explanations.

One possibility is that Guhai Namasivaya is referring to one of three *avattai* - modes of being of the deity:

1. *ilayam*, in which only the divine knowledge is manifest.
2. *bhogam*, in which knowledge and action are equally balanced.
3. *adikaram*, in which action predominates.

If one follows this explanation, one can interpret Guhai Namasivaya's comments to mean that Arunachala is one of the places where Siva became involved in the world, performing *lilas* as well as bestowing grace and liberation, whereas Chidambaram is a *kshetra* where Siva's energy is concentrated solely on the granting of divine knowledge. This interpretation does not imply that one place is superior to the other. It merely notes that Siva chooses to function in a different way in Chidambaram. At first glance this explanation looks plausible, particularly since Guhai Namasivaya contrasts the *bhoga kshetra* of Arunachala with the 'divine *kshetra*' of Chidambaram. However, closer scrutiny reveals a major problem: Siva has repeatedly manifested at Chidambaram for the benefit of his devotees there, so that would make it, like Arunachala, a *bhoga kshetra*.

An alternative explanation can be found in *Day by Day with Bhagavan* (6th December, 1945). Devaraja Mudaliar asked Bhagavan about one of the verses from *Arunachala Mahatmyam* that Bhagavan had translated into Tamil. At the end of the verse Arunachala-Siva, speaking of Himself, says, 'Know that within me caves shine, surging with many enjoyments [*bhoga*]'. The following dialogue ensued:

I asked Bhagavan whether the cave mentioned in it is inside God or inside the mountain (which of course is also said to be God). Bhagavan replied, 'Of course, in the context, it means the cave is inside the hill and that there in the cave are all enjoyments'. Bhagavan added, 'The stanza says you are to believe that inside this hill there is a cave and that all enjoyments are to be found there'. I also asked Bhagavan, 'I have read somewhere that this place is called *bhoga kshetra*. I wonder what is meant thereby?' Bhagavan replied, 'Yes, it is so. But what does it mean? If thinking of this *kshetra* can itself give *mukti*, what wonder if this place can give all other enjoyments one may desire.'

Going back to the story, it will be remembered that Guhai Namasivaya had instructed his disciple to go and live in Chidambaram. Guhai Namasivaya still felt that, if he pleaded his case, he would be allowed to stay.

He told his Guru, 'This slave will remain here, having the Guru's *darshan*. He will not go to another place but will remain with the feet of the Guru. Moreover, this slave cannot go on living without having daily *darshan* of the Guru.'

Guhai Namasivaya was unmoved. 'Go to Chidambaram,' he ordered, 'and have *darshan* of the Golden Dancing Hall [the shrine in which Siva in the form of Lord Nataraja resides]. If the Lord there gives you *darshan* even as I do myself, stay there. If not, come back here.'

Accepting the promise that the divine *darshan* would not be cut off, the disciple finally admitted defeat.

'This is good advice,' he said, 'I will follow it.'

Then, having accepted the decision, he composed the following song in praise of his Guru:

O Namasivaya! You destroy the subtle bonds of birth through your words and through your meditations, through your glance and through your touch, and through your compassion which gladdens our hearts! You attained liberation through the fourth leg of the chair.

The cryptic last line is an allusion to *turiya*, the fourth state that underlies the other three states of waking, dreaming and sleeping.

Guhai Namasivaya attained liberation by abiding permanently in this fourth state. Guhai Namasivaya, feeling that delay would serve no useful purpose, responded to the song by saying, 'You can start right now'.

Guru Namasivaya began to walk towards Chidambaram and by the time night fell he had covered about ten miles. Desiring a place to rest, he sat down under a tree and spent three hours absorbed in the Self. Then, becoming aware that he was hungry, he composed a *venba* verse that he addressed to Unnamulai, the consort of Siva in the Arunachaleswara Temple:

You who are the dearest to the heart of Lord Annamalai!
Holy Mother Unnamulai!
Bring forth rice(2) from every household to feed
Your servant whose every thought is in praise of you!

At the moment when Guhai Namasivaya was composing this verse, there was some sweet rice resting on a golden plate in the temple. It had been offered to Lord Annamalai as *naivedyam* (food offering), and the priest who had officiated had inadvertently forgotten to take the plate home with him when he had locked up the temple for the night. When Unnamulai heard Guru Namasivaya's prayer, she took the plate of rice to him and then returned to the temple.

At daybreak the priests opened the temple and looked for the golden plate. After searching fruitlessly for some time, the priests and the people of the town became convinced that the plate must have been stolen by a thief, although they could not understand how he had got into and out of the temple. No *pujas* were performed for eight hours, for everyone was engaged in a search for the missing plate.

At the end of that period a brahmin boy went into a trance, became possessed by a spirit and announced, 'Guru Namasivaya is under a banyan tree on his way to Chidambaram. Mother took food for him. The plate is lying there. Go and fetch it.'

The plate was eventually found there and returned to its rightful place in the temple.

Guru Namasivaya got up the next morning, completed his morning ablutions and walked eastwards, praising his Guru. His next stop was at a holy place called Rishi Vandanam. In this *kshetra* Siva and Parvati remain united as *Ardhanari*, an androgynous half-male and half-female form. This deity had been worshipped in ancient times by the king of the *rishis*, Agastya Mamunivar.

Guru Namasivaya took a bath there in a holy tank called Aiyayiram Kondam,(3) completed his *puja*, and then with a purity of body, speech and mind, worshipped the Lord of that place and had his *darshan*. Afterwards, he went back to the banks of the holy tank and became absorbed in the Self.(4) Some time later, when the pangs of hunger came, he composed the following verse to the Divine Mother:

Can a child starve as long as its mother lives?
Is it just that I should languish as long as you are here on
this earth?
You whom all the hosts of heaven praise!
You whose shoulders are slender like bamboo!
And whose earrings are of heavenly pearls!
I beg you, bring me rice!

When the Mother heard this song, she came and asked, 'My son, when I am united with the Lord here, is it proper for you to sing to me as a separate entity? Now sing me another song in which I am united with him.'

Guru Namasivaya obliged by composing and singing the following song:

You whose earrings are of heavenly pearls,
You who are one with Lord Siva,
whose throat is like a dark cloud pierced by lightning!
Mother, you who shine brighter than gold!

You who rise up, mountain-like in my stony heart!
I beg you, bring me rice!

As soon as he had completed the singing of this verse, the Mother brought food to him. Guru Namasivaya ate it, resumed his journey, and soon reached another famous pilgrimage centre, Vriddhachalam. He had a bath in the River Manimuttar, had *darshan* of Lord Siva and Parvati in the form of Lord Pazhamalainathar and the Goddess Periyamayaki, returned to the bank of the tank and became absorbed in the Self. When hunger again affected him, he composed a verse and addressed it to Periyamayaki, the local name of the Goddess, who is traditionally depicted as an old woman:

Elderly Lady, you who are known as Periyamayaki,
abounding in goodness!
Elderly Lady, you who ever abide at the side of Lord
Siva!
Elderly Lady, you whose body is dark blue!
Elderly Lady of the mountain, you who stand before me,
I beg you, bring me rice!

As soon as he had uttered this verse, the Mother appeared as an elderly woman with a walking stick and said to Guru Namasivaya, 'What is this, my son? Is it good to sing of me with your tongue, repeatedly calling me "Elderly Lady"? Can an old woman walk? Can she fetch water? Can she bring you food?'

Guru Namasivaya responded by saying, 'Mother, at Balakasi [young Kasi] you are Balambika [young Ambika]. This is Vriddhakasi [old Kasi]. Here you are Periyamayaki [old woman]. Your Lord is also Pazhamalainathar [the old mountain Lord]. That is why I sang of you in that way.'

The Mother replied, 'That may be so, but now sing of me as a young woman'.

Guru Namasivaya responded by saying, 'If I do, I will be singing of two different Mothers'.

'If that is so, then let it be,' answered Periyamayaki. 'But please sing of me as a young person.'

Guru Namasivaya then composed another verse:

You who dwell upon a mountain
girded by the River Manimuttar,
You at whose feet devotees fall in praise!
You who dwell at Lord Siva's side!
You whose ever-youthful breasts
are adorned by a jewelled necklace!
I beg you, bring me rice!

As he was concluding the verse, Mother, in the form of Balambika [the young form of Parvati], brought food to him. After eating it he continued his walk and eventually reached a town called Bhuvanagiri. From this place his final destination, Chidambaram, could be seen in the distance. When Guru Namasivaya first sighted the four *gopurams* (temple towers) of the Chidambaram Temple from Bhuvanagiri, he spontaneously composed a verse that expressed the great joy that the sight of them

had brought to him:

At the mere sight of these four gopurams
all my sins have vanished
like cotton drifting into a flame.
What then will be the desert,
O Lord of Tillai's Hall, (5) of those who cast their eyes
upon the divine redness of your feet,
girt with tinkling anklets?

He was singing this song as he reached Chidambaram. On his arrival he took a bath in the Siva Ganga Tank in the main temple, after which he composed yet another song in praise of the holy Mother:

Those who see the holy bath of Mother Sivakami,
as voices versed in ancient Tamil swell in praise,
will see the effects of all their deeds destroyed.
And those who gather this water in their hands
will be plundered of all their actions' evil fruit!

Sivakami, meaning 'The lady who desires or who is desired by Siva', is the name of the female deity in the Chidambaram Temple. She is the silent witness to Lord Nataraja's dance in the inner sanctum. The reference to the 'holy bath of Sivakami' and the purifying effect of bathing in this tank may be an allusion to one of the main Chidambaram myths.

Before the creation of the shrine of Lord Nataraja there was a temple dedicated to Kali in the Tillai forest. When Siva first began His *ananda tandava*, his dance of bliss, in Chidambaram, Kali was filled with pride and challenged the Lord to a dance contest. Siva wished to eliminate her arrogance so he laid down the following terms: whoever won would become Lord of Tillai; whoever lost had to leave his or her shrine. While the gods and sages watched, Kali and Siva began to dance. When Siva performed a difficult manoeuvre called *urdhva tandava* - one leg thrust vertically towards the sky - Kali conceded defeat because she was unable to execute that particular step. After acknowledging her defeat she was forced to leave her shrine in the heart of the Tillai forest and relocate herself outside the boundary of the town. In order to remove the pride that led her to challenge Siva, Kali bathed in the temple tank and afterwards worshipped Siva. Her fierce form disappeared and she acquired a gentler demeanour, along with a new title, 'The Great Goddess who possesses the Tillai forest'.

In this verse Guru Namasivaya seems to be saying that just as Kali expiated her sins by bathing in the tank, all others who follow her example will have their future karmas wiped out.

The site of the dance contest is sometimes identified as the Nritta Sabha inside the main temple. It now features an eight-armed image of Siva performing the *urdhva tandava*, the posture that defeated Kali.

Next: [Guru Namasivaya sat there, absorbed in the Self, until the pangs of hunger again brought him back to the world.](#)

(1) Appa means 'father' in Tamil. It is commonly used as a polite but endearing form of address to an adult male.

(2) When Guru Namasivaya asks the Goddess to bring him rice in this and subsequent verses, he is actually just asking for food. Since rice is the predominant component in all South Indian meals, it has become a synonym for food in general.

(3) Literally, 'he who holds 5,000', a reference to the large size of the tank.

(4) This account is primarily derived from a Tamil anthology of writings on Arunachala entitled *Arunachala Puranam* (1934 ed., pp. 55-74). Most of the biographical narrative and all of the poems that appear here are a direct translation from this text. The periodic explanations and interpretations are my own.

The anonymous author of the original Tamil story frequently states that Guru Namasivaya went into or became absorbed in *nishta*. Generally this means abiding undisturbed in the Self in a state in which one is not aware of anything other than the Self. However, the various contexts in which the term appears seem to indicate that the author is describing a *samadhi* state or a yogic trance in which Guru Namasivaya becomes aware of facts or events of which he had no knowledge in his ordinary waking state. I have, accordingly, occasionally translated *nishta* as 'yogic trance'.

(5) Tillai, the ancient name for Chidambaram, is the Tamil name for a tree (*excoecaria agallocha*) which is common in that area. It also refers to the forest of Tillai trees that originally surrounded the town. The 'Lord of Tillai's Hall' is Nataraja, the presiding deity at Chidambaram.

Guru Namasivaya

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Before I continue, it will probably be helpful to give a brief account of the configuration of the Chidambaram Temple. It has as its sanctum the Chit Sabha, 'The Hall of Consciousness', from which the town itself derives its name. It contains the *akasa* lingam (a *lingam* in the form of empty space, denoting the unbroken expanse of consciousness in which all manifestation arises) and a large bronze image of Nataraja. Immediately in front of it, serving it as a *mantapam*, is the Kanaka Sabha, 'The Golden Hall' that Guru Namasivaya often refers to. The Nritta Sabha, which commemorates the Kali-Nataraja dance contest, is in the second *prakara*. There is also the original *lingam* shrine (Mulasthanam) that faces east and antecedes the other halls. This was the original temple before Lord Nataraja came to Chidambaram to perform his dance of bliss. That story will be told later.

Returning now to the narrative, Guru Namasivaya completed his bath in the Siva Ganga Tank and walked into the temple, expecting to have the *darshan* of Lord Nataraja in the inner shrine. Instead, in that place, the Lord gave him *darshan* in the form of Guhai Namasivaya, who was then still living on Arunachala. This unexpected manifestation prompted Guru Namasivaya to compose a verse in praise of Siva:

Lord of the Golden Hall! King of Heaven!
You who grant to those who praise and worship you
whatever it is they most desire,
whether they be spiritual adepts or mere disciples!
How was it that you came to dwell on holy Annamalai
in the form of my Guru, Guhai Namasivaya,
and placed your twin feet upon the head
Of such a wretched devotee as I?
This is something that my understanding cannot
compass.

One account of his life written in verse, describes this manifestation of his Guru in the following way:

The Lord whose golden image resides in that place
Appeared to him in the form of a loving *Sadguru*.
Awakening from a swoon, he pondered deeply to
himself, 'What ill can befall me if I remain here in this

place?'

His realisation deepened until it encompassed all of creation.(6)

In an ecstatic state he composed another hundred verses, all praising Siva, in less than half an hour. Afterwards, he retired to a secluded room in the temple and became absorbed in the Self.

It will be remembered that Guhai Namasivaya had told Guru Namasivaya that if the latter did not have *darshan* of his, Guhai's, form at Chidambaram, he could return to Arunachala. The manifestation therefore meant that Guru Namasivaya had to stay in Chidambaram and attend to the renovation work that Guhai Namasivaya had given him. At this point in the story Siva himself interceded and made the temple authorities aware of Guru Namasivaya and the works he was destined to perform.

At that time there were three thousand brahmin priests who were permitted to serve in the Chidambaram Temple. The *Chidambara Mahatmyam*, a compilation of local legends and myths, has an account of how these priests came to occupy their position.

There was a legendary king from North India called Hiranyavarman who rebuilt the temple as an act of gratitude after he was cured of leprosy by taking a bath in the Siva Ganga Tank. He also brought back from North India the 3,000 Dikshitaras, the original priests of the temple who had, for some reason, emigrated to the north. On their return there were only 2,999, but the original number was restored when Siva agreed to be counted as one of the 3,000.

This legend may have arisen out of a need to explain why the Chidambaram Temple does not follow the traditional rules and rituals prescribed in the Saiva *Agamas*, the scriptures that lay down the regulations for all acts of worship in South Indian Saiva temples. Instead, the temple rites are governed by a manual attributed to the sage Patanjali. This was brought back from North India by the Dikshitaras when King Hiranyavarman persuaded them to return home.

The temple suffered no loss of prestige by adopting these strange rites. On the contrary, for many Saivas, the Chidambaram Temple is the holiest place of worship. Its unique sanctity can be gauged from the fact that millions of Tamil Saivas refer to it as '*Koyil*', meaning 'the Temple'. For them, no further name is required or ever given to it.

When Guru Namasivaya appeared in Chidambaram, the priestly caste was headed by three of these Dikshitaras - Jivanmukta, Jatamukta and Mahamukta. By virtue of their seniority they were entitled to be carried from place to place in a palanquin. Shortly after Guru Namasivaya's arrival, Siva himself appeared before these priests and gave them the following instructions.

'A very great person has come from Arunachala. He is very much absorbed in yoga. You must arrange a secluded place for him. Many holy works are destined to be done by him on my behalf. If you were to ask, "What place shall we put him in?" I would tell you that his place is on the northern side of the temple beyond the temple border. I have twice placed my foot there in the past: once when writing the *Tiruvachakam* of Manikkavachagar, and also when I brought the milk ocean for Upamanyu. You can take him there.'

Upamanyu was the son of the sage Vyaghrapada and his story

appears in the *Mahabharata*. He had acquired a taste for milk, but none was available in the forest hermitage where he lived. He asked his mother for some, but she was unable to give him any. She explained that they were living simply and primitively and that they depended on Siva for all their needs. Seeing in this statement a chance to take his request to a higher authority, the boy demanded to know who Siva was and asked how he could earn his grace. His mother taught him how to mediate, without being aware that her son was only learning in order to beg for milk.

When the boy had mastered the technique of meditating on Siva, Siva appeared before him and said, 'Child Upamanyu, I am pleased with you. You are a sage already. You are a great devotee. I have seen that you are a *brahmarishi* in the making. You will have eternal youth and lustre. An ocean of milk will be there for you whenever you want it. You can enjoy this with all your friends and relatives and finally you will have bliss by attaining me.'

A local tradition locates this incident at Chidambaram. The Tirupparkkadal Tank - 'The Tank of Divine Milk' - is situated to the north of the main temple compound. Adjoining it is a *math* that is supposed to be the place where Manikkavachagar, the ninth-century Saiva poet-saint, composed many of the poems that are included in the *Tiruvachakam*, his principal work.

The priests took Guru Namasivaya to his appointed spot near the Tirupparkkadal Tank and returned to the temple.

Guru Namasivaya sat there, absorbed in the Self, until the pangs of hunger again brought him back to the world. In his usual fashion he called out to Parvati for food:

My lady Sivakami whom the wise praise
with the sweet nectar of their words!

I offer praises to your golden foot
that treads the realms of heaven,
that you may preserve from starvation
this flesh-bound bodily frame.

I beg you, bring me rice!

At the conclusion of the song, the Mother brought him food. As she was approaching him, she sang a verse in reply:

I, Sivakami, sister to the great Lord
who in ancient times drank with relish
milk at the demoness' breast,⁽⁷⁾ have brought rice to
delight

the servant and slave of Guhai Namasivaya.

From that day on Lady Sivakami daily brought food and gave it to Guru Namasivaya. He continued to sit there, absorbed in his yogic practices.

While he was staying in that spot, many people who frequented the place used to leave money in front of him because, seeing him, they felt that he was a very great spiritual being.

After some time, when a large amount of money had piled up in this way, Guru Namasivaya looked at it and commented, 'This wealth is a killer of man'.

He told the people who were nearby at the time to take it all for themselves. This they did. When the three thousand priests saw what was happening, they were upset because they felt that a lot of wealth was being wasted. They went to Guru Namasivaya and begged him to change the place where he sat and did his yoga.

'Because you are staying here, outside the temple, all kinds of

people are taking away the money that is being given to you. If you come inside the temple and let us collect the money for you, a lot of holy works and endowments can take place, So, please come and sit inside the temple.'

'I have come here at the request of the Lord of Chidambaram,' replied Guru Namasivaya. 'What reason is there for me to go inside?'

The three thousand priests felt that Guru Namasivaya would never come inside if they alone invited him, so they asked the three principal priests to intercede directly with the deity.

They went to him and said, 'If Guru Namasivaya comes inside the temple, money will come and many holy works and endowments can start.'

'Yes, this is good,' said the Lord. 'But he won't come if you call him. I myself will go and fetch him.'

Then, assuming the form of a *sangama*,⁽⁸⁾ he went to the place where Guru Namasivaya was staying and stood before him. When the Lord arrived, carrying a stick and a water pot, Guru Namasivaya was absorbed in the Self. As he came out of this state, he saw the elderly Saiva monk in front of him and exclaimed respectfully, 'Slave of your feet!'

'Where have you come from?' asked Guru Namasivaya.

The *sangama* replied, 'We reside at Tillaivanam [another name for Chidambaram]'.
'And what is your name?' enquired Guru Namasivaya.

'My name is Ambalattaduvar [The Dancer in the Hall].'

'And what is the purpose of your coming here?' asked Guru Namasivaya.

'I need some food,' said the *sangama*. 'I went all over this place. Some people told me that if I came here I would get some food.'

Guru Namasivaya told him, 'Mother Parvati brings food for me every day. I don't even have a vessel.'

The *sangama* responded by saying, 'Here is the vessel,' as he pointed at the moon.

Then, to demonstrate how he got his food, Guru Namasivaya looked in the direction of the Goddess, and some food immediately appeared.

Addressing the *sangama*, he said, 'Please take this.'

The *sangama* refused, 'I won't take it,' he said.

'Why not?'

'If you give me food every day in this way, only then will I take it. Not otherwise.'

'You appear quite old,' remarked Guru Namasivaya. 'I travel about a lot to places like Kasi and Rameswaram. How can I promise that I will offer food to you every day? You may not be anywhere near me.'

'If I walk in front of you,' replied the *sangama*, 'then you must give me food. If I am behind you, I do not need food.'

Guru Namasivaya agreed: 'If you stand in front of me I will give you food. Otherwise I will not.'

'I agree to those terms,' said the *sangama*. 'I will stand in front of you if I need food.'

'So now please eat,' said Guru Namasivaya, offering him his first instalment of food.

The *sangama* then tried to revise the conditions, 'If you offer food after first touching your *vibhuti* pouch or *rudraksha* beads,

then I will take it.'

Guru Namasivaya refused to agree to these new conditions. He repeated his previous commitment: 'If you stand before me, I will give you food.'

The *sangama* backed down. 'Good,' he said. 'When I need food, I will come and stand in front of you.'

'And if you do,' reiterated Guru Namasivaya, 'I will give you food.' (9)

Just as the Lord was assuming a position which indicated that he was about to take Guru Namasivaya's food, he said, 'I need water to quench my thirst'.

Guru Namasivaya made no attempt to serve him personally. 'The Tirupparkkadal Tank is over there,' he said, pointing in the right direction. 'You can take water from there.'

The Lord did as he had been instructed, went to the tank and then suddenly disappeared. He reappeared in the temple, still in the guise of a *sangama*, and spoke to the three thousand priests.

'I have arranged a plan. All of you should now take the palanquin in which I ride and all the ceremonial banners that have come into existence here for my sake. Get him into the palanquin, arrange all the banners around him, and then take him along all the four streets that surround the temple. Afterwards, bring him to me.'

The priests took the palanquin and the banners, went to Guru Namasivaya and politely requested him to come to the temple with them.

When they asked him to get into the palanquin. Guru Namasivaya refused, saying, 'Why a palanquin for me? There is no need.'

The three thousand priests responded by telling him, 'This is not a palanquin, it is a tiger-skin seat, appropriate for a yogi like you'.

Guru Namasivaya, still disinclined to go with them, replied, 'No, it is not fitting'. Then the priests tried a new approach.

'Yesterday afternoon our Lord came to you. What did you tell him?' Guru Namasivaya remembered the strange encounter he had had on the previous day and the thought came to him that the *sangama* may not have been just a simple monk. He went into a yogic trance and saw in that state that on the previous day it had been the Lord Himself, who had come and given him *darshan*.

He resumed his normal state and remarked to the priests, 'After he came here, he must have gone to tell you what happened'.

When he finally understood what had been happening, he composed the following verse:

Appearing as a Virasaiva mendicant,
The Lord himself manifested to me
and asked me to give him alms.
But when I offered him food,
He bade me create all the endowments
to guarantee his service every day.

Only after reciting this verse did he finally consent to get into the palanquin. As he was being taken around the streets of Chidambaram, he sang another verse in praise of the Lord:

Our Lord in Tillai's Hall, Consort to her whose breasts
are ample and shapely,
to whom I daily raise my voice in praise.
Will he abolish the births, past, present and future,
upon this great wide earth

of those who have not known his holy heart?

Will he cut out their good and evil deeds
and bestow his twin feet upon them?

Singing this song, he reached the temple. He disembarked from his palanquin near the flagpole, took off his sandals outside the Panchakshara Compound, walked into the Golden Hall and had *darshan* of the Lord there.

He then looked at the three thousand priests and asked them, 'What endowments shall I create?'

The Lord himself then spoke through an oracle in the temple: 'Create endowments for all people.'

Guru Namasivaya thought that if the Lord himself gave a donation to start the endowment, and gave it in such a way that it was witnessed by all the assembled devotees, it would be certain that the endowment would continue forever. He therefore sang the following verse while holding a golden plate in his upraised hands:

Lord of Chidambaram's Hall, you who held me in your
sway
in the form of my revered Guru!
I beg you for alms
so that no holy endowment shall be lacking
in the worship of your lotus foot.

As soon as he had completed the singing of this verse in front of the Lord, a gold coin came from the sky and fell onto the plate. All those present said that the Lord himself had given a donation. Feeling that this was a sign that the Lord wanted them all to contribute, the devotees present gave an abundance of gold, pearls and other things. Guru Namasivaya handed over all these donations to the three thousand priests and began to walk away from them.

As he was attempting to leave, his steps faltered and he enquired rhetorically of the priests, 'What is stopping me now?'

The priests, not knowing the answer, replied, 'How can it be known to us?'

Guru Namasivaya again went into a yogic trance to ascertain the reason for his inability to leave.

When he resumed his normal state he enquired, 'Has there been any jewellery made for the Lord?'

After thinking for some time they replied, 'Tinkling anklets [*silampu*] and a girdle of tinkling bells [*kinkini*] have been made. That much we know. Apart from this, there is no other jewellery.'

On hearing this answer Guru Namasivaya called the artisans and said to them, '*Silampu*, *kinkini* and *veerakantamanai* [a ring with little bells worn on the leg] have to be made. How much money will be needed?'

'Fifty thousand gold coins.' They answered, very optimistically.

Without querying the amount, he took all the money that had been collected and gave it to them, asking them to make the necessary jewels.

Later, when he was resting, all the three thousand priests gathered together and spoke bitterly among themselves.

'We all thought that we could benefit through him. But now he has given all the wealth to make jewellery!'

Then they all united in ridiculing him, saying, 'If the Lord wears such expensive jewels, then he will have to dance as well.'

One of them also said, sarcastically, 'So our Lord is now going to dance just for him.'

Guru Namasivaya heard all their comments. On the fortieth day, when all the jewellery had been completed and brought to him, he called all the three thousand priests and said to them, 'If the Lord now dances, will you all be willing to witness it?'

To this they answered immediately, 'How much merit must we have acquired to see such a sight! If we see it, twenty-one generations of our line will be redeemed.'

Then Guru Namasivaya thought to himself, 'The people here are very sceptical. If the Lord moves, they may say that it is merely on account of the breeze.'

He therefore ordered that all the windows be closed. He adorned the Lord with the jewellery that had been made and then, earnestly seeking *darshan* of the Lord's dance, he sang the following verse:
(10)

Lord of the Hall, can we ever perish
if but one of your feet dances?
To behold all the gods in heaven
could not compare with such a sight!
And could that foot ever grow weary
which delighted victorious Patanjali
and the fierce tiger-footed Vyaghrapada too?

To understand the significance of this and subsequent verses, it is necessary to digress a little into the background and traditions surrounding the *ananda tandava*, the dance of bliss that Lord Nataraja performs in Chidambaram.

Next: [There, as Ramana Maharshi says, Siva 'dances the dance of stillness in the dancing hall of the Heart'](#)

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(6) *Pulavar Puranam*, ch. 21, v. 3.

(7) The Lord in this verse is Krishna, not Siva. When Krishna was a baby, a demoness called Putana was engaged to assassinate him. She went to his house in disguise and tried to breast-feed him. Krishna sucked the life out of her, along with the milk, and she died after reassuming her original form.

(8) The word *sangama* is used to denote a monk of the Virasaiva sect.

(9) Guru Namasivaya is not yet aware that his visitor is Siva himself. When Siva asks for food to be given to him every day, he is hinting that he wants Guru Namasivaya to arrange for food to be served to him every day in the temple. When Guru Namasivaya subsequently realised that Siva had been asking for such an endowment, he came into the temple to make all the arrangements. However, as will be seen later, the first instalment he collected was used for a different kind of offering.

When Siva asks Guru Namasivaya to make his offer after touching his *vibhuti* and his *rudraksha* beads he is asking him to make a formal vow. For a Virasaiva, a vow taken while touching the *vibhuti* pouch would be an unbreakable commitment.

(10) All the jewellery that he ordered is associated with temple dancing. The different ornaments are designed to make a pleasant jingling sound when the dancer moves around.



The story begins, according to the *Koyil Puranam*, the *sthala puranam* of Chidambaram, in the forests of Tarakam. In that place there was a large multitude of *rishis*, all following the ritualistic practices of Mimamsa. Siva went there to confront them, accompanied by Vishnu disguised as a beautiful woman, and Adishesha, the snake. Siva initially caused the *rishis* to have a violent quarrel among themselves, but later their anger was directed against Siva, whom they attempted to destroy by means of magical incantations. They created a fierce tiger out of a sacrificial fire and made it attack Siva. Unperturbed and still smiling, he caught hold of it and with the nail of his little finger he stripped off its skin and wrapped it around himself like a silk cloth. Undiscouraged by this failure, the sages renewed their offerings and produced an enormous serpent that Siva seized and wrapped round his neck like a garland. Then he began to dance. However, the *rishis* had not exhausted their tricks. They created a malignant dwarf, Muyalakan, who rushed towards Siva with the intention of attacking him. Siva touched him with the tip of his foot and fractured his spine, leaving him writhing on the ground. Siva then resumed his dance, which was witnessed or accompanied by several of the gods and the *rishis*. A typical description of the dance scene can be found in *Patanjali Charita*, 4, 61-7:

At the very sign of his [Siva's] brow, Vishnu takes up the drum *mardala* which, with its noble rumbling note, starts the musical sound. With his lotus hands, Brahma takes up a pair of cymbals, Indra plays the bamboo flute, while Saraswati plays the lute. Siva ties up his hair with the snake, wraps the elephant hide around his waist and begins to dance.

The myths and legends of Chidambaram state that Siva was compelled to continue his dance at Chidambaram, rather than in the Tarakam forest, because he could see that the original site could not sustain the powerful energies of the dance. Invoking a yogic parallel, he identified the snaking *ida* and *pingala* currents in the subtle body with geographical locations north and south of Chidambaram, and then said that the central channel [*natuvinadi*]

passed directly through Tillai, making it the centre of the world and the site of the original cosmic *lingam*.

It is through this analogy that Chidambaram, according to local tradition, became the centre of the cosmos, the *axis mundi* around which all the rest of the universe rotates. The dance is so powerful, only the true centre, the heart of the spiritual and material universe, can support and sustain it. According to this tradition, Chidambaram becomes the world centre on the physical plane; on the spiritual plane, the central shrine becomes the Heart-lotus, the still centre out of which emerges the primal dance of creation in the form of Siva's dance of bliss.

I will return to the theme of the *ananda tandava* as the primal dance of creation a little later, but before that it needs to be stressed, in the light of what follows in Guru Namasivaya's story, just how inaccessible the dance is to ordinary eyes. The *Suta Samhita* (8, 9, 47) declares that the dance is beyond the vision of even the greatest of sages and adds that only Siva's consort is naturally able to witness the dancing movements of the Lord. Elsewhere the *Suta Samhita* (3, 4, 6) states:

Devi in her great mercy witnesses what is impossible for others to see. Like the mother who partakes of the medicine that the baby cannot directly taste, though through the mother would benefit by it, she gazes and passes on the benefit of the vision to the children, her devotees.

How then did the sages and gods get to see the dance? In the Tarakam forest it was Siva himself who graciously granted divine sight to the assembled gods and *rishis* so that they could watch him dance. Without that grace, even they would not have been able to see him.

In addition to Devi, known as Sivakami in Chidambaram, there are two sages who have been granted the boon of being able to witness Lord Nataraja's dance: Patanjali, who is the incarnation of the cosmic serpent Adishesha, and Vyaghrapada,⁽¹¹⁾ the father of the boy Upamanyu for whom Siva created the ocean of milk. Patanjali and Vyaghrapada were worshipping the original *lingam* at Chidambaram with such devotion that Siva appeared before them and said that he would grant them a boon. They both asked to be eternal witnesses to his dance of bliss at Chidambaram, a request that Siva granted.

What exactly does this dance symbolise and signify? I will begin to answer that question by quoting five verses from *Unmai Vilakkam*, a thirteenth century canonical work of the *Saiva Siddhanta* school:

- 34 The arch [over Lord Nataraja's head] indicates *Omkar*, and the torches⁽¹²⁾ that fill the space with light are the [five] letters⁽¹³⁾ that are inseparable from *Omkar*. Those who have given up their egoism know that this is the dance of the Lord, and knowing this, they will be released from the cycle of births and death.
- 35 Understand that creation emanates from the drum, preservation from the hand of hope, destruction from the fire held in one hand, veiling from the foot which presses down, and liberation from the foot held aloft.
⁽¹⁴⁾

- 36 Our Lord's dance consists of scattering the darkness of *maya*, burning the strong karma, stamping down the soul's impurity, showering grace and lovingly plunging the soul in the ocean of bliss.(15)
- 37 The silent *jnanis*, destroying the three-fold bond, are established where their selves are destroyed. To such *jnanis*, the dance of Lord Nataraja, the embodiment of grace, is the visible fountain of bliss in which they deeply drink.
- 38 The one who is beyond word and thought becomes absorbed in grace, takes the form of the unsurpassed *panchakshara mantra* [*Nama Sivaya*] and dances on the base of *parasakti*, witnessed by his consort, the daughter of Himavan. Those who understand this mystic dance and cherish his memory have no further births.

I noted earlier that for devotees of 'Koyil', Chidambaram signifies both the physical centre of the world and its spiritual Heart-lotus, that space of consciousness in which physical creation appears, and the place where the surrendered mind has to subside and die in order to get a true knowledge of Siva. The Heart is the place out of which creation manifests, and it is also the place where enlightenment takes place. The Heart-dance expresses itself phenomenally as the world and the power that sustains it, but it must be remembered that the place of its origin is the centre into which the *jiva* must withdraw in order to transcend creation and attain enlightenment. In an explanation of the significance of Lord Nataraja's dance, the Tamil work *Tiru-Arul-Payan* (IX, 3) identifies these two aspects and makes the following recommendations:

The dance of nature proceeds on one side; the dance of enlightenment on the other. Fix your mind in the centre of the latter.

I propose to follow the advice in the next few paragraphs.

Firstly, I should like to suggest that Guru Namasivaya's odyssey to Chidambaram can be interpreted in an allegorical way, revealing that the physical steps he took represent an internal spiritual pilgrimage towards and into the Heart.(16)

What clues or hints are given that this might be the inner import of the story? Firstly, one should remember the role that Sakti, Siva's consort, plays in Saivism. As I pointed out in the quote from *Suta Samhita* (3, 9, 6) her role is essentially that of a mediator and transmitter of Siva's grace. She alone can witness the primal dance and, having become energised and activated by it, 'She passes on the benefit of the vision to the children, her devotees'. In Saivism it is Sakti, not Siva, who creates the world; the *panchakrityas* (creation, preservation, destruction, veiling and grace) are all mediated through her.

On each day that Guru Namasivaya travelled towards Chidambaram, the Heart, he called out to a local form of Sakti and begged for food. The rice he received was the grace of the Lord, mediated through his consort. And each time he was the recipient of such grace, he was purified to the extent that he was able to move nearer and nearer to Chidambaram, the space of consciousness.

In Saivism, Sakti brings *maya* into existence while simultaneously providing the grace through which one can

transcend it. As verse thirty-six of *Unmai Vilakkam* notes, the energy of the dance scatters the darkness of *maya*, burns up *karma*, stamps out the soul's impurities, showers grace, and finally plunges the soul into the ocean of bliss.

When Guru Namasivaya, at the threshold of the sanctum, bathed in the Siva Ganga Tank, he was immersing his soul in this ocean of bliss. As he commented at the time, those who have been fortunate enough to have this bath 'will see the effects of all their deeds destroyed [and] will be plundered of all their action's evil fruit'.

The grace of Sakti brought him, step by step, to the threshold of the Heart; the bath in the sacred ocean of bliss eradicated his karmas, enabling him to move on and encounter the Lord in the Heart-lotus, the inner sanctum of the temple. But there, much to his surprise, he found not Siva but his own Guru, Guhai Namasivaya, thus confirming the ancient truth that God and the Guru are one and that at the moment of enlightenment they can both be found in the Heart.

There is a mystical and mysterious paradox at the heart of Saiva cosmology. Though the inherent power of Siva enables Sakti to arise within himself and perform all the *panchakrityas*, Siva himself does nothing. He is eternal silence, stillness and peace, untouched and unaffected by the activities that Sakti performs through his power and on his behalf. When one reaches the Heart, the source of creation, and directly experiences the dance of bliss there, one finds that it is a motionless dance of silence, not a frenetic physical act of movement and physical creation. There, as Ramana Maharshi says, Siva 'dances the dance of stillness in the dancing hall of the Heart'.⁽¹⁷⁾

I have already noted that Guru Namasivaya's story can be read on two equally valid levels: the miracle-laden physical and the spiritually symbolic. The two levels are clearly discernible as the narrative continues. At the point where I began this lengthy digression on Saiva philosophy and cosmology, Guru Namasivaya was singing a song to Siva, asking him to perform the dance of bliss for all the assembled priests and devotees. Though, ostensibly, he is asking for a physical manifestation, he is also calling on Siva to reveal himself in their hearts. Having, through grace, established himself in the Heart, Guru Namasivaya now has the power and the authority to grant a glimpse of that sublime state to the people assembled in the temple. But, when that glimpse is granted to them, they are paralysed with awe and fear. This is a common reaction in impure souls who are pushed too near the divinity.⁽¹⁸⁾

However, this is getting ahead of the story. I go back now to the song of supplication that Guru Namasivaya was addressing to Lord Nataraja, asking him to perform his dance:

Supreme Godhead! Divine Lord of Chidambaram!
You who perform your divine dance in Tillai's Hall
as the multitude sing hymns of praise and adoration,
and Tumburu and Narada⁽¹⁹⁾ intone a heavenly melody,
as Vishnu slings a drum upon his hip
and raps out a thunderous rhythm,
and Gauri, Lady Ambika herself,
strikes her bright celestial cymbals
to mark the time in even measure!⁽²⁰⁾
Will the day ever come
When my eyes will rejoice to see

that pounding golden foot,
that upraised lotus foot,
that delicate waist and navel's whorl,
that breast, white with smeared ash,
draped with a fierce tiger's noble pelt,
those four-fold golden arms
each as great as Meru's mount,
that blackened throat, that face, that holy head?

When Guru Namasivaya praised him in this way, Lord Nataraja started dancing. Everyone present fell down, overcome by awe, prostrated, and remained motionless, face down.

After a long time had passed, three of the three thousand priests raised their heads and said, 'The dance has been going on for a long time. Guru Namasivaya, you who are orchestrating the dance, and you, Lord of Tillai, who dance without, in reality, moving at all - your greatness cannot be perceived unless you stop the dance!'

Guru Namasivaya replied, enigmatically, 'Am, I the one who is asking for the dance? Am I the one who is asking for it to stop?'

'The one who is keeping time,' they all said, 'is the one who should stop first.'

Guru Namasivaya had been beating out the rhythm of the dance. He ignored their request and went on singing to the dancing Nataraja:

Holy dancer of Tillai's Hall! Our creator and daily
benefactor!

Would there be any pain in your upraised foot
and would that other foot ever falter
which pounds upon the demon

Muyalakan if your dance went on and on for all eternity?

Muyalakan is the malignant dwarf who was created by the *rishis* to attack Siva in the Tarakam forest. Siva broke his back with his toe. In all iconographical representations of the *ananda tandava* Muyalakan is depicted under Nataraja's right foot. The dwarf symbolises ignorance, so when Nataraja repeatedly stamps on his body during the dance, he is eradicating the ignorance that separates one from God. Muyalakan is a Tamil name. In Sanskrit the dwarf is known as Apasmara, which means 'an epileptic'. Ignorance, in an epileptic fit of madness, tries to assail God, but is immediately broken and destroyed.

In response to this new verse, the dancing became even more frenzied. The three thousand priests, still wanting the awesome dance to stop, tried a different approach.

'Guru Namasivaya is singing the praises of Siva,' they said, 'and Siva is obeying him. Let us sing in praise of Guru Namasivaya and see if he will accept our request to stop the dance.'

Countless thousands of verses he has sung
in the presence of Tillai's Lord,
who delights in the pleasures of the hunt,
and who sports eternally with his consort Kali
as Kama's body wastes and withers away.(21)
It was on hearing that holy song of Guru Namasivaya
that the Lord was deeply pleased
and raised his ankleted foot to dance.

The change of tactics worked. Guru Namasivaya responded by composing a new verse that requested Siva to stop his dance:

My Lord, you who dance in the Golden Hall,

Your glorious foot and anklet are decorous indeed

As they dance to the rhythm *tat-taa-taata-ti*.

May you now heed my song and cease your holy dance.

The dance stopped as the verse was completed. The priests were so impressed by Guru Namasivaya's ability to command God himself to dance, they vowed to each other that after his death they would worship the *lingam* over his *samadhi* as if it were Siva himself. During his subsequent stay in Chidambaram Guru Namasivaya composed hundreds of verses, many of which have survived. One of his biographers, writing about this period, noted: 'No poem did he write but it sang the praises of his Guru, and no lesser deity filled his thoughts, only Lord Siva himself.'[\(22\)](#)

This is certainly true of his most famous poem, *Annamalai Venba*,[\(23\)](#) which extols Siva in the form of Arunachala and repeatedly praises the greatness of his Guru, whom he considered to be Arunachala-Siva in human form. Going through the verses, one can easily visualise him sitting in Chidambaram, dutifully carrying out his Guru's orders, but secretly dreaming of Arunachala-Siva, Guhai Namasivaya, his Guru, and the blessed period of his life when he had the constant company of both. A selection of verses from *Annamalai Venba* appears elsewhere on this site. Even the most casual perusal of this poem will give an indication of the reverence, the esteem and the devotion that the author felt for the sacred mountain and for its human manifestation, Guhai Namasivaya.

The story of Guru Namasivaya's life ends rather abruptly here, for there is no further record of his activities, or even an account of his passing away. The text that is the source of most of the material in this chapter merely says that after performing many more holy works, Guru Namasivaya finally passed away at Tirupperundurai, a town associated with Manikkavachagar. However, to contradict this, there is a stone inscription in Chidambaram, apparently executed shortly after Guru Namasivaya's death,[\(24\)](#) which says that 'Namasivaya became one with the Siva *lingam* upon the mountain Arunagiri'. After this inscription there are three words, *vanta guru tanam*, whose meaning, in the context, is a little obscure. However, they can be taken to mean that Arunachala himself took the form of Guru Namasivaya and came to Chidambaram to execute his work there.

A devotee, Chinna Nalla Nayan, donated the stone and had the epitaph carved. He concluded his inscription with the following words:

We joyfully offer our worship to him who dwells in the city of the tiger [Chidambaram] in a hall of burnished gold, where Guru Namasivaya, disciple of the godly Guhai Namasivaya, who dwells on the slopes of Arunachala, dedicated himself to the service of the Lord. Praise be to the Lord!

See [Annamalai Venba](#) for a selection of Guru Namasivaya's verses in praise of Arunachala

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[\(11\)](#) Both are alluded to in the song, composed by Guru Namasivaya in which he was attempting to persuade Lord Nataraja to begin his dance. Vyaghrapada, whose name means 'tiger-footed,' was given tiger's feet by Siva so that he could climb bilva trees to collect their leaves for ceremonial worship.

[\(12\)](#) The arch usually has many small flames coming out of it. *Omkar* is the

sound of *Om*. The semicircle over the top of Nataraja's head is often compared to the top half of the Tamil letter for *Om*.

(13) The previous three verses equate various parts of Nataraja's body with the five holy syllables of Saivism: *Na Ma Si Va Ya*.

(14) Nataraja is always depicted with four arms. One of his legs is raised in a dancing posture. The positions and activities of the limbs are held to represent the *panchakrityas*, the five-fold activities of God: creation, preservation, destruction, veiling and grace. A verse from *Chidambaram Mummani Kovai* offers a similar interpretation:

O my Lord! Your hand holding the sacred drum has made the world and ordered the heavens and earth and other worlds and innumerable souls. Your lifted hand protects the multifarious animate and inanimate extended universe. Your sacred foot, planted on the ground, gives an abode to the tired soul, struggling in the toils of karma. It is your lifted foot that grants eternal bliss to those that approach you. These five actions are indeed your handiwork.

(15) As he was dancing in the forest of Tarakam, Siva himself expounded on the significance of his dance to all the assembled gods and *rishis*:

This is the illusion of the world as you see it here, and you will now know the eternal truth of Supreme *Brahman*, immanent, beginningless, eternal, consciousness, full of bliss, unending and One. (*Patanjali Charita* 4, 70-73)

(16) I am not saying that the physical events are fictitious. Some or all of them may have happened. I am merely pointing out that the narrative has been carefully constructed in such a way that it naturally lends itself to a symbolic interpretation.

(17) *Arunachala Ashtakam*, verse seven. See *Five Hymns to Arunachala*, tr. K. Swaminathan.

(18) An interesting commentary on this phenomenon can be found in *No Mind - I am the Self*, 2nd ed., pp. 193-4, where it is explained how and when the mind sinks into the Heart. There it is stated that when the impure mind approaches the Heart, it feels the peace and bliss of the Self, but if it comes too near, it then experiences a great panic and a great desire to go back to the world of manifestation again.

(19) Tumburu and Narada are *devarishis* and celestial musicians. Both of them witnessed the original dance of Siva in the Tarakam forest, before it was moved to Chidambaram

(20) All the texts pertaining to the *ananda tandava*, and all the sculptural representations of it, have Brahma, rather than Gauri, playing the cymbals. Siva's consort is always depicted as a non-participating witness to the dance. I have no idea why Guru Namasivaya wanted to change her role in this way.

(21) Kama, the god of love, was destroyed by Siva when at Brahma's request, he interrupted Siva's *tapas* and tried to make him fall in love with Parvati. Since Kama also signifies lust and desire in general, the lines indicate that though Siva sported with Parvati, it was just a *lila*, having no real lustful context.

(22) *Pulavar Puranam*, ch. 21, v. 2.

(23) Annamalai is one of the many Tamil names for Arunachala. It can be translated as 'unreachable or unapproachable mountain'. A *venba* verse is a Tamil metrical form that has four lines, three the same length and the fourth slightly shorter.

(24) The death date on the inscription occurs in the middle of the twelfth century. This seems to be a little early to me. Various references in Guhai Namasivaya's poems indicate that they were written about a hundred years later

In a hagiography such as this, it is not possible to separate, definitively, fact from fiction. Guru Namasivaya's literary works and the various inscriptions in Chidambaram can only corroborate the following facts:

- 1) That he lived at Arunachala with his Guru, Guhai Namasivaya.
- 2) That he achieved a very high spiritual stage through the grace of his Guru and the power of Arunachala.
- 3) That he went to Chidambaram and was responsible for many temple endowments there. An inscription there gives a list of all his literary works, all of which are poems praising different aspects of Siva.

Some of the miraculous events may have come from the author's imagination, since no Saiva hagiography is complete without them. But this does not mean that such events are not possible. In a conversation I had with Sri. H. W. L. Poonja (Papaji) he told me that he had met a yogi in the Himalayas who could command a goddess to bring him food. Sri Poonjaji tested him by asking for a

certain dish that was the speciality of a town several hundred miles away. Though they were both sitting at an altitude of 15,000 feet in a remote, inaccessible part of the Himalayas, the food immediately materialised out of nowhere. This yogi, a young Kashmiri boy, could also call on Saraswati, the goddess of learning, and with her help speak any language. Sri Poonjaji, an accomplished linguist, found that the boy could talk to him in all the ten languages that he knew.

The boy, who also demonstrated his ability to levitate and fly, had attained these *siddhis* through a determined practice of raja yoga. However, he quite frankly admitted that he had not attained Self-realisation and said that he was looking for a Guru who could give him *Brahma jnana*.

Feats such as those attributed to Guru Namasivaya are possible through yogic training, but they should not be taken to be indications or proofs of Self-realisation.

Guru Namasivaya in his poems states that through the grace of Arunachala and through the power of his Guru, true knowledge dawned in him causing the cycle of endless births to cease permanently. This is a better indication of his realised state than any of the miracles he performed.

Annamalai Venba
(Translated by Robert Butler)

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Invocation

You whose feet are luxuriant flowers!
You, Supreme Lord, who, mounted on the rat,(1)
Lead the celestial retinue!
Guide me as I, a mere dog at your feet,
Sing in delicate Tamil *venba*
A song garland to holy, everlasting Annamalai.

1

Mountain, dancer of the primal dance.(2)
Mountain sought on that day by the two.(3)
Mountain adorned with the bright moon and the dancing serpent.(4)
Mountain where justice flourishes.
Mountain who summons those rich in *jnana tapas*.(5)
Saying, 'Come!'
Annamalai.

2

Mountain who destroys the births of devotees.
Mountain who fosters the births of the cruel and the faithless.
Mountain who causes love to stream forth.
Mountain who, taking the form of the bird Simbul,(6)
Came and vanquished the lion:
Annamalai.

3

Mountain who vanquished death with a blow of the foot.(7)
Mountain who stemmed the river of Madurai's Pandiyan king.(8)
Mountain sublime, praised by Sundaramurti.(9)
Mountain who disregards all my faults, doer of evil deeds as I am:
Annamalai.

4

Mountain who shows compassion to the wretched.
Mountain who gives without fail whatever is asked.
Mountain who flayed the elephant.(10)
Mountain of medicine who bestowed half his form upon Parvati:
(11)
Annamalai.

5

Blue-throated Mountain, three-eyed Mountain,(12)
Mountain impossible for the inhabitants of all the worlds to praise.
Mountain who manifests to devotees.
Mountain who dispels the arising births
Of those who daily worship him:
Annamalai.

6

Mountain, provider of food and wealth.
Mountain who bestows all the boons desired by his devotees.
Mountain on whom praises thickly fall.
Mountain who, as a column of fire, penetrated through all the
worlds:
Annamalai.

7

Mountain to whom Guhai Namasivaya, performer of great
austerities,
Makes obeisance, daily adorning him with a garland of one *venba*
verse. Mountain who abides in the blissful hearts
Of those who have transcended the waves of desire and all the rest:
Annamalai.

8

Mountain standing serene as the five sacred letters.(13)
Mountain who dispels the effects
Of his devotees' deceitful and dark karma.
Mountain, reformer of hearts.
Mountain of divine medicine,
Conferring the supreme attainment of true knowledge:
Annamalai.

9

Mountain whom the faithful walk around, keeping him to their
right.
Mountain who steals away the entire burden
Of the past actions of those who circle him.
Mountain penetrating all the worlds.(14)
Mountain where my father and Guru, Om Namasivaya, dwells:
Annamalai.

10

Mountain where gypsy maidens, slender as reeds,
Sport with the heaven-dwelling moon.
Mountain like red coral.
Mountain who, as *Sadguru*,
Placed his splendrous foot upon my head:
Annamalai.

11

Mountain who, taking the form of my spiritual Guru and Master,
Namasivayan, the compassionate heavenly Lord,
Held me in his power.
Mountain whom the Gods themselves praise,
Mountain who dispels all my mental anxieties,
Evil-doer that I am:
Annamalai.

14

Mountain where ripens a harvest of *venba* verse
In the affectionate thoughts of his devotee Guhai Namasivaya.
Mountain fathomed by those strong in devotion.
Mountain who grew as a column of red flame
As the two sought him:
Annamalai.

15

Mountain sought after by tall Mal and he of the cool lotus.
Mountain whose flowery foot yields up the fruit of liberation to
devotees. Mountain upon which devotees of great austerities
swarm.
Mountain who established Uma, her of the unsuckled breast,
As half of himself:
Annamalai

17

Mountain who manifested in triangular form.(15)
Mountain adorned with the snake,
Along with the skull beads of Brahma and Vishnu.
Mountain who affords ample protection.
Mountain who endures in the hearts
Of devotees who praise him:
Annamalai.

18

Mountain praised by my Guru, Om Namasivaya, in beautiful
Tamil. Mountain who affords a sweet sight
To those who, seeing, worship him.
Mountain who, growing long, stretched from the root of the
universe. Mountain who prospers in the hearts of devotees
Who, praising, think of Him:

Annamalai.

19

Mountain who stands as the five letters, the *Vedas* and *Agamas*.
Mountain who shines out alone
As the single syllable '*Om*'.
Mountain firmly fixed in the heart.
Mountain who placed me, a mere dog, in the company of his
devotees: Annamalai.

20

Mountain to which my Guru, Om Namasivaya,
Who exercises enduring rule over me, makes obeisance,
Praising him for many days in verses of pure Tamil.
Mountain who is ever true.
Mountain who placed me, evil-doer that I am,
Beneath his own foot:
Annamalai.

22

Mountain who drives out the darkness of spiritual ignorance.
Mountain who, for devotees, illumines what is false.
Mountain in the form of perfect *jnana*.
Mountain who came to me, a mere dog,
As father, mother and *Sadguru*:
Annamalai.

23

Ash-besmear mountain.
Mountain who stood as a column of fire.
Mountain who rides the bull as his mount.
Mountain who struck death with his foot.(16)
Mountain who, on that day, becoming the bird Simbul,(17)
Vanquished Hari:(18)
Annamalai.

24

Mountain who contained the poison *halahala* in his throat
So that the loudly lamenting hosts of the gods might be saved.
Mountain who is the essence of the four *Vedas*.
Mountain who, taking the form of my Guru,
Came to rule over me, a mere cur:
Annamalai

25

Mountain who on that day
As Mal (the First, the Tall) and Ayan looked on,(19)
Manifested as the supreme light In a column of brilliant flame.
Mountain who thundered forth the *Vedas*.
Mountain who stands before those who meditate on it

And bestows liberation upon them:
Annamalai.

26

Celestial Mountain who, coming into the world
As my Guru Om Namasivaya,
Dwells within the heart of this devotee.
Mountain who wipes out the fruits of former deeds.
Mountain who abolishes all the suffering
Of a long succession of births, too numerous to tell:
Annamalai.

27

Mountain who stands with his Sakti,
To whom he gave half of himself. (20)
Mountain who sprouted forth as the cause of liberation.
Mountain praised in every quarter.
Mountain who removes the arising births
Of those who praise and extol him:
Annamalai.

28

Mountain who wears the young moon in his matted locks.
Mountain to whom righteous sages flock.
Mountain who is beyond time.
Mountain who subdued Yama with a blow of his foot (21)
As he advanced, roaring:
Annamalai.

30

Mountain whose throat darkened as he drank the deadly poison,
Thus assisting the dwellers in heaven
And becoming their Supreme Lord.
Mountain agreeable to those who serve it.
Mountain praised and worshipped
By the inhabitants of both heaven and earth:
Annamalai.

31

Mountain who is the delightful sweet honey
Of the pure Siva-*jnana*,
Which assuages the pangs of hunger.
Mountain who eternally affords his gracious sight to devotees,
Warding off the obscuring waves of illusion:
Annamalai.

32

Pure Mountain who unites with the hearts
Of those servants, clothed in eminence,
Who, eschewing the five senses that connect one to the world,

Embrace the happiness of true knowledge.
Mountain who deludes the wicked,
Concealing himself from them:
Annamalai.

33

Majestic Mountain who, as my Guru,
Held me in His sway,
Keeping me from wandering through ever-increasing births,
Placing in my hand sweet, true knowledge,
And uniting his twin feet together upon my head:
Annamalai.

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Photo of Arunachala, courtesy Dev Gogoi

(1) The invocatory verse is addressed to Ganesh whose *vahana* or vehicle is the rat.

(2) A reference to Siva dancing as Nataraja in Chidambaram.

(3) The principal puranic story about Arunachala features a dispute between Brahma and Vishnu over which of them is the greater. Siva witnessed their dispute and decided to teach them a lesson in humility. He appeared before them in the form of an infinitely long column of light (some versions say fire) and announced that whichever of the two could find the end of this column could call himself the greater. Vishnu took the form of a boar and burrowed downwards to find the bottom end, while Brahma took the form of a swan and flew upward in search of the top. Neither extremity was found even though the two gods spent thousands of years trying. Both returned unsuccessful, finally conceding that Siva was greater than either of them. Vishnu then requested Siva to manifest in a form that was less dazzling to the eyes so that devotees through the ages could have *darshan* of his form. Siva obliged by condensing himself into the mountain of Arunachala. Thus, for devotees of Arunachala, the mountain is not merely a symbol of Siva or the place where he resides, it is Siva himself, manifesting in a physical form.

(4) Siva wears as a diadem on his head the crescent of the fifth-day moon. According to *Sri Siva Tatva*, a *Saiva Siddhanta* text, 'The moon is *soma*, the sacrificial offering. Placed near the fiery third eye, the crescent moon shows the power of creation coexistent with that of destruction'.

There is a puranic story in which Siva appeared before some *rishis* in the guise of a beggar. Through his power he caused the *rishi's* wives to fall in love with him. The *rishis*, angered by his behaviour, decided to kill him. They dug a pit, out of which emerged a tiger. Siva killed it and wore its skin. Later snakes came out of the pit, but they had no effect on Siva. He wound them around his body and used them as ornaments. Because of this incident Siva is almost always depicted as having at least one poisonous snake wrapped around his body.

(5) Meaning, those who have strenuously pursued liberation either for a long time, or with some degree of success. Ramana Maharshi often cited this line when he spoke of the magnetic power of the mountain.

(6) One of Vishnu's *avatars* was as Narasimha, a half-man and half-lion form. Narasimha disembowelled the demon Hiranyakasipu, who had harassed the gods. After the demon had been killed, Narasimha was still full of anger and threatened to annihilate the whole universe. Siva appeared in the form of Simbul (in Sanskrit he is known as Sarabha), an eight-legged flying creature. This 'bird' dug its claws into Narasimha, lifted him off the ground and killed him. Siva subsequently wore the skin of Narasimha as an item of clothing.

(7) A reference to the story Markandeya, a sixteen-year-old who, with Siva's

help, managed to avoid his predestined death.

Mrikanda, Markandeya's father had prayed to Siva to get a son. Siva appeared before him and said, 'Do you desire to have a virtuous, wise and pious son who will only live to be sixteen, or a dull-witted, evil-natured son who will live for a long time?'

Mrikanda opted for the short-lived son, who turned out to be a child-sage. On the day of his appointed death, Yama came to collect him. Markandeya cried out to Siva for help and embraced the idol of Siva that he usually meditated on. Yama threw his rope and lassoed the idol as well as Markandeya. This angered Siva, who came roaring down from the heavens, after which he killed Yama with a single blow of his foot. Siva then gave Markandeya a boon that he could be sixteen forever, and thus avoid death, and he also restored Yama's life.

(8) About a thousand years ago, when the king of Madurai conscripted everyone in his city to help to shore up the dams on the Vaigai River when it was about to overflow its banks, Siva took the form of a coolie and did the work that had been allocated to an old woman devotee. She paid him in sweet rice cakes.

(9) One of the four principal Tamil Saiva poet-saints whose devotional outpourings now constitute the earliest portions of the Saiva scriptural canon.

(10) The elephant was Gajasura, a demon who could not control his sensory indulgences. Siva pierced him with his trident. As he was dying, Gajasura asked Siva for a boon, and Siva agreed. The boon was that Siva should wear Gajasura's flayed hide as an ornament.

(11) In *Arunachala Mahatmyam* and *Arunachala Puranam*, Parvati, known locally as Unnamulai, unites with Siva to such an extent that each shares the other's form. Unnamulai means, 'She whose breasts have never been suckled'. Traditionally, Siva and Unnamulai appear as a half-male and half-female figure, the left side being Unnamulai and the right side Siva. In this merged or unified state Unnamulai becomes Siva's *sakti*, the divine energy which brings into existence all manifestation. Iconographical representations of their combined form, which is known as Ardhanariswara, show a half-male and half-female body, with the dividing line being the vertical axis running down the middle of the body. Parvati (Unnamulai) earned the right to this union by performing intense *tapas* over two lifetimes, the first as Sati, and the second as Parvati.

(12) After a long period of animosity the *devas* and the *asuras* agreed to cooperate to churn the ocean of milk to obtain *amrita*, the elixir of immortality. At some point during the churning a burning mass of poison appeared whose fumes began to asphyxiate the whole world. At Brahma's request Siva swallowed the poison and held it in his throat. This poison left a blue mark on Siva's throat, earning him one of his many titles - Nilakantha, which means 'blue-throated'.

The two normal eyes of Siva represent the sun and the moon. The third, in the centre of the forehead, symbolises fire. The eyes together represent the three sources of light that illumine the earth, space and the sky. Through his three eyes Siva can see past, present and future, an accomplishment which, as Guhai Namasivaya points out in verse 28, enables him to transcend time. The central eye is the eye of higher perception. Normally it is directed inwards, but when it is turned outwards, it burns all that appears before it.

(13) *Na, Ma Si Va Ya*, making *Nama Sivaya*, which means 'obedience to Siva'.

(14) A reference to Siva as the infinitely long column of light who penetrated all the heavenly and subterranean worlds.

(15) Seen from a distance, the profile of the mountain is triangular.

(16) See [footnote seven](#).

(17) See [footnote six](#).

(18) Hari is one of the names of Vishnu.

(19) Tamil names for Vishnu and Brahma.

(20) See [footnote eleven](#).

(21) See [footnote seven](#)

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36

Mountain where the black male monkey
Plucks the fragrant sweet mango fruit,
And bestows it on his female partner.
Mountain who is blissful to those who are free
From the mind's wandering thoughts.
Five-hued mountain:
Annamalai.

37

Mountain where dwells,
As an enduring cloud of compassion
My Guru, Om Namasivaya, performer of great austerities.
Mountain of surpassing greatness.
Mountain difficult for Mal and Brahma to seek:
Annamalai.

38

Mountain who stood as a tall pillar of fire
Unreachable to the sight and minds of Mal and Ayan,
Who entreated him.
Mountain of compassion who bestowed his grace on me.
Ruddy mountain, difficult to see and beyond compare:
Annamalai.

39

Mountain who yields up to the devotees who sing his praises
All the things that they desire,
The foremost of which is liberation.
Mountain clad in lasting glory.
Mountain who, as *Sadguru*, ruled over me,
Wicked wretch that I am:
Annamalai.

40

Mountain who grants the boons
Desired by the ascetics who honour and worship him,
Reciting the five holy letters
Which are praised in all the worlds.
Mountain always abounding with wise ones and their virtuous
ways:
Annamalai.

42

Mountain who came softly as a devotee of Bhairava,
To the delight of the illustrious saint
Who slew his own child to serve him.(22)
Mountain who, as the bird Simbul
Did battle with the form of Narasimha:
Annamalai.

44

Mountain who shares half his form with Unnamulai.
Mountain whose sight is precious to the eye and sweet like nectar.
Mountain whom the heavenly ones extol.
Mountain whom devotees daily mediate upon with worship and
praise: Annamalai.

45

Mountain who delights in the Tamil song-garland
Sweetly recited by my Lord, full of grace, Namasivayan.
Mountain crowned with a fraction of the moon.
Mountain who sports in the company of his servants
Who devote their love to him:
Annamalai.

46

Mountain by whom all are engendered,
The gods, the three who are said to be gods to the gods themselves,
The inhabitants of earth, and the *rishis*.
Mountain who, in extolling his greatness,
We speak of as being without father and mother:
Annamalai.

47

Mountain to whom it is seemly for love-filled devotees,
Contemplating him in their thoughts, to perform *pūja*.
Mountain who dwells in the heart of true devotees
In whom attachment to the wavering mind,
Which leads to desire, has been destroyed:
Annamalai.

48

Mountain to whom his most virtuous devotee, Namasivaya,
Offers praise, daily strewing abundant flowers before him.
Mountain sought on that day by the two.
Mountain who performs his dance eternally in Tillai's mystic hall:
Annamalai.

50

Mountain who forever wards off the affliction of birth and death.
Sadguru who rules over me, dog that I am,
I who sought his golden foot,
The foot that bestows goodness,
And which Mal, though he dug down through the earth
Wearing the vile head of a boar, was unable to see:
Annamalai.

51

Mountain to whom his devotees make obeisance,
Singing of and celebrating his divine nature,
Who consumed the cruel poison, saving the world from destruction.
Mountain who wears the white ash over his whole body:
Annamalai.

52

Mountain who stood as a brilliant effulgence in Tillai's wood,
In Kasi, in holy Arur, in southern Madurai and in Nellai.(23)
Mountain whom the ancient *Vedas* sing.
Mountain who eternally inspires those who love him,
Performing the sacred dance in their hearts:
Annamalai.

55

Mountain, the vision of whose golden head and foot
Mal and Ayan seeking, could not know.
Mountain who became my Guru, Namasivaya,
To cut through the attachments
Of his devotee's evil wandering mind:
Annamalai.

56

Mountain surrounded by many carpeted groves.
Mountain upon which heavy showers of sweet perfumed rain
Are ever pouring down.
Mountain where the waters of flowery verdant meadows
Incessantly gushing forth, flow down:
Annamalai.

59

Mountain who, seeing the great austerities, without limit
Which she performed in solitude to save the whole world,

United with the Mountain's daughter as half of himself (24)
And gracefully stands affording his protection:
Annamalai.

60

Mountain whose meaning blossoms forth abundantly
For those who, taming the treacherous unruly senses,
And bringing them under control,
Have purified their minds and attained serenity.
Mountain of celestial ambrosia,
Who, whatever may befall, deigns to appear:
Annamalai.

61

Mountain whose foot, entering, moves in the hearts
Of those of fit understanding,
Who have subjugated the five senses and three *gunas* (25)
So that their fires cannot be kindled.
Mountain who came not upon the earth in a mother's womb,
And was not born:(26)
Annamalai.

62

Mountain who, in the ancient city of Madurai, praised in song,
Ate the sweet cakes and then fetched and carried earth
So that the Vaigai River would not break its banks.(27)
Mountain who in the Golden Hall eternally performs his dance:
Annamalai.

63

Mountain, heavenly pathway of Siva-*jnana*,
Invisible both to him of the lotus
Who flew through the whole heavenly sphere
In the form of a swan, seeking him,
And to beautiful Lakshmi's royal Lord,(28)
Who, taking the form of a boar, searched all the lower worlds:
Annamalai.

65

Mountain who, dwelling in Madurai's city of wide renown,
Examined exquisite Tamil verse in the company
Of the poets of the noble first academy.(29)
Mountain of surpassing excellence, who came upon the earth
Taking the form of the Guru, Namasivaya:
Annamalai.

66

Supreme mountain!
Mountain who is the first cause, without beginning.
Mountain, one half of whom is the Mother.

Mountain who chants and sings the *Vedas*.
Mountain who is justice.
Mountain who is *yantra* and *tantra*.
Mountain who is the five-syllable mantra proclaimed aloud:
Annamalai.

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(22) A story from the *Periyapuranam* in which Sirutondar, to fulfil a vow made to Siva, kills his own son and offers him to a passing *sadhu* to eat. The *sadhu* belonged to the Bhairava sect, which is noted for its wild ways. The *sadhu*, who turned out to be Siva himself, had come to test Sirutondar. After the offering had been made, proving Sirutondar's faith and devotion, Siva restored the boy to life.

(23) Chidambaram, Benares, Tiruvarur, Madurai and Tirunelveli: all places where Siva has manifested and performed miraculous deeds.

(24) Parvati was the daughter of Himavat, meaning 'the mountain'. This is the story referred to in footnote eleven.

(25) *Rajas*, *tamas* and *sattva*, the interplay of which determines the quantity and quality of one's thoughts.

(26) Saivas make a point of stressing that Siva, unlike Vishnu, has never been born on earth. He manifests, rather than incarnates, whenever the need arises. The earlier reference to him not having a father and mother makes the same point.

(27) See footnote eight. on [Page 1](#)

(28) Lakshmi is the consort of Vishnu.

(29) In ancient times there were three *sangams* or assemblies which examined the works of Tamil scholars and poets and passed judgement on them. In the first *sangam* Siva himself appeared incognito and acted as one of the judges.



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67

Mountain who imprints himself upon the hearts of those
Who, mastering the five senses, have attained knowledge,
So that the births caused by their evil deeds vanish away.
Mountain whom devotees perpetually praise and worship:
Annamalai.

68

Valiant mountain who struck the God of death with his foot
As he advanced on the exalted child-sage Markandeya,
Roaring and panting with eagerness.
Mountain who, as the *Sadguru*, governs me with his kind partiality:
Annamalai.

69

Mountain whom devotees and those of fit attainment praise and
extol, Garlanding him with the five syllables and with flowers,
Chief among which are the atti and the cassia.
Mountain who, rejoicing, appears to his devotees everywhere
With his consort, who is like a golden creeper at his side:
Annamalai.

71

Mountain who compassionately planted his foot
And ruled over Sundarar,
Appearing as an aged brahmin, learned in the four *Vedas*,
Who came leaning on a stick and opposed his marriage
And, preventing it, kept him from delusion:(30)
Annamalai.

73

Mountain of true knowledge, unreachable to Brahma and Vishnu,
Who travelled his length, diligently seeking,
But were bewildered.
Mountain who, upon the earth,
Wears four different forms in the four *yugas*:[\(31\)](#)
Annamalai.

79

Mountain who on that day spoke to the sixteen-year-old
Markandeya Saying that twice eight years would always be his
age.
Mountain who stands illustrious.
Mountain who disregards the mistakes committed by his devotees:
Annamalai.

81

Mountain whose throat is adorned with poison.
Mountain who came to cut off daily the evil deeds of his devotees.
Mountain who softens the heart.
Mountain who engenders the sweetness of supreme bliss
In those who love him:
Annamalai.

84

Mountain who, granting their wish,
Installed the three *asuras* in their cities
And then, hurling his great fiery arrow, saw them fall.[\(32\)](#)
Mountain who rules only over those followers
Who, with intense longing, daily seek him out
And place their faith in him:
Annamalai.

86

Mountain who drives away suffering.
Mountain who removes the ancient burden of deeds.
Mountain who beckons his devotees to come unto him.
Mountain who reveals his holy foot.
Mountain who withers up the afflictions of devotees,
Who feel his presence in their hearts:
Annamalai.

87

Mountain who, spreading from the roots, along the trunk,
And up to the very tips of the branches,
Permeates the understanding of the true followers
Who have received his teaching.
Mountain resonant with the sound of *pranava*.[\(33\)](#)
Mountain who calls out to devotees, great in austerities,
Bidding them come:
Annamalai.

Mountain who gracefully appears
 Before those who, performing thrice-daily worship,
 Joyfully praise him.
 Mountain endowed with more than a mother's sweetness.
 Mountain who, as *Sadguru*, prospers in my heart, dog that I am:
 Annamalai.

Mountain who, when Daksha opposed him, took away his life.(34)
 Ash-besmeared mountain who stood before Mal and Ayan
 As a pillar of fire.
 Lofty mountain who, to those who wish to speak of it,
 Lies beyond all comparison.
 Mountain whose tall crown is adorned by the waters of the Ganges:
 (35) Annamalai.

Mountain unreachable to tall Mal, who wields the discus,
 And to Ayan too.
 Mountain who destroys the age-old karma of his devotees.
 Mountain who protected those who trembled with fear,
 Seeing the baneful poison in the ocean.
 Mountain with five faces:(36)
 Annamalai

Mountain who appears in every quarter.
 Mountain who, rejoicing, rides the bull.
 Mountain who graciously grants the boon of supreme attainment.
 Mountain adorned by the minds of the liberated.
 Mountain whom the celestials praise.
 Lofty Mountain of surpassing excellence:
 Annamalai.

Mountain who wards off their suffering and bears up
 Those whose devotion is strong,
 Those who have practised great austerities,
 And those who have taken refuge in him.
 Mountain endowed with truth.
 Mountain who swallowed the poison *hala*,
 That the gods might not perish:
 Annamalai.

Mountain who confers undying liberation.
 Mountain who, destroying for his devotees
 The indestructible residue of deeds,(37) comforts them,
 Decreeing that the impassable ocean of multifarious births

Shall henceforth be still:
Annamalai.

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Mountain who appeared mounted on the bull,
Along with the bangle-adorned Uma,
And graciously pardoned my sins.
Mountain who wears the crescent moon,
And whose matted locks are entwined with the holy Ganges:
Annamalai.

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(30) Siva prevented the Tamil poet-saint Sundaramurti from getting married by appearing on his wedding day in the form of a brahmin and producing a document, signed by Sundaramurti's grandfather, which stated that all subsequent generations of his family would be slaves of this man. The elders of the village, who knew the grandfather, attested the signature, and the marriage was cancelled.

(31) According to the *Arunachala Mahatmyam*, Arunachala in four successive *yugas* is composed respectively of diamond, gold, silver and earth. *Yugas* are major epochs of Hindu cosmology.

(32) At a time when the *devas* and the *asuras* were having one of their many wars, the three cities of the *asuras* were protected by a boon which specified that they could only be destroyed by one shot of a single arrow. When the *devas* were on the point of finally losing, they appealed to Siva and he obliged them by destroying all the asura cities with a single shot.

The myth is pregnant with symbolic meaning. The *devas* and the *asuras* represent the good and bad mental qualities which are constantly at war with each other over countless lifetimes. The *deva-asura* war had in fact been going on interminably, consuming both sides for innumerable generations. Sometimes the *devas* were on top and sometimes the *asuras*, but neither side had ever been able to achieve a definitive victory. It was only when the *devas* were about to be finally defeated that they appealed to Siva and put their faith in his power and grace, rather than their own efforts. When their efforts stopped, Siva destroyed the three cities with a single arrow. The three cities in this parable can represent any or all of the following trinities: the three states of waking, sleeping and dreaming; the three *gunas* - *rajas*, *tamas* and *sattva*; the three *karmas* - *sanchita*, *prarabdha* and *agamyā*; the three times - past, present and future.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this interpretation: (1) effort aimed at destroying habits of the mind can never bring about peace, it can only prolong the warfare between competing and conflicting mental tendencies. (2) In a moment of absolute non-effort, a moment of true surrender to the Lord in which one is no longer trying to accomplish or attain anything, grace takes over and annihilates all the impediments which were previously obstructing an awareness of Siva, the abiding reality.

Manikkavachagar referred to this enlightening moment when he sang, 'Siva smiled at me, and through his smile he destroyed the three cities of the *asuras*'.

(33) *Pranava* is the sound of *Om*, the primordial sound out of which all creation manifests.

(34) Daksha was the father of Sati, who was the wife and consort of Siva in the birth before she became Parvati. In that birth she was also known as Uma. Brahma thought that the business of creation could not proceed properly unless Siva married, so he persuaded Daksha to have a daughter who would attract Siva by the power of her yogic *tapas*. The mother-goddess of the universe took the form of Sati and promised that she would go through with this arrangement, but added that if Daksha ever showed her a lack of respect, she would abandon her side of the bargain.

Sati won Siva by the power of her love and asceticism and they were eventually married. Many years later Daksha organised a sacrifice to which he

invited all the gods except Siva. Some versions of the story say that Siva did not show Daksha proper respect at an earlier sacrifice, so was not invited again. Another explanation was that Daksha disliked Siva for his wild lifestyle and for the fact that he had once severed one of Brahma's heads, and still carried the skull around with him. Brahma was Daksha's father.

Sati went alone to the sacrifice and discovered that no portion of the offerings had been allocated to Siva. Daksha treated her very disrespectfully, saying that she should not have come to the sacrifice at all. Sati reminded him of the condition of her incarnation - that she would end it if Daksha ever treated her badly. Sati then sat down and self-immolated, burning her body to ashes in a yogic fire that she manifested inside herself.

When Siva heard the news, he vowed revenge. He tore out a clump of his hair and threw it against a mountain, where it turned into Virabhadra and Mahakali. Virabhadra was ordered by Siva to go to the sacrifice and take revenge. He went there with a great army, killed Daksha and many others present, and evicted all the gods who had come to attend. Daksha's head was thrown in to the sacrificial fire.

Sati reincarnated as Parvati and eventually, after a period of extreme *tapas*, married Siva again and became united with his physical form.

(35) Siva is always depicted with the Ganges emerging from his head. The Ganges is the embodiment of the goddess Ganga who agreed to flow on earth to wash away the sins of people who bathed in her. Starting in heaven, she flows down to earth, where the force of her waters is initially absorbed by Siva's head. It is said that the earth could not otherwise bear the full impact of the descent.

(36) On the north and north-east side of Arunachala the profile of the mountain appears to have four subsidiary peaks as well as the main one. This particular aspect of the mountain is known as the 'five faces'.

(37) *Sanchita karma*, the residue of *karmas* left over from all previous lifetimes.

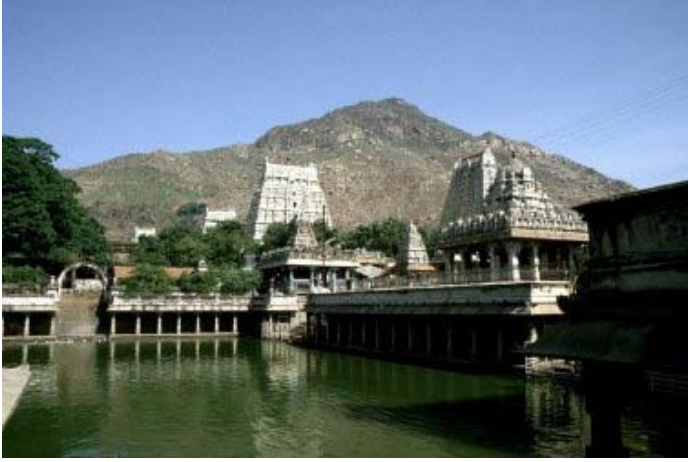
Arunagirinatha

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The Kili Gopuram in the Arunachaleswara Temple

Prior to the advent of Ramana Maharishi, Tiruvannamalai's most famous saint was probably Arunagirinatha, a Murugan *bhakta* who lived at the foot of Arunachala in the fourteenth century. Reliable information about him is hard to come by for the earliest account of his life was not published until the nineteenth century, about 500 years after he died. This version, which has several variations, contains the following principal elements.

Arunagirinatha was born in Tiruvannamalai and spent the greater part of his life there. He was reputed to be the son of a courtesan called Muttammai. As he grew up he found the company of courtesans so attractive, he spent most of his time in their houses. When his mother died, all the properties he inherited from her were squandered to pay for his lust.

Arunagirinatha had a sister, Adi, who was very fond of him. Taking advantage of her affection, Arunagirinatha persuaded her to part with her jewels and all her other possessions so that he could continue to indulge his appetite for the local courtesans. He continued with this way of life for many years. As he became older, his body became diseased and the better class of courtesan began to jeer at him and avoid his company.

The major turning point in his life occurred when he had spent all his sister's money. Not knowing that she was destitute, he approached her again in the hope of getting another hand-out. His sister, who had nothing left except the clothes she was wearing, told him that her funds were exhausted. Since she still loved her brother, and since she still wanted to be of assistance to him she offered him her own body, saying, 'If your lust is so insatiable, you can use my body for your sexual satisfaction'.

These words deeply affected and shamed Arunagirinatha. He mentally reviewed the wasted years of his life and came to the conclusion that he had been committing crimes against God. As his sense of shame deepened, he decided to commit suicide by jumping off one of the *gopurams* in the Arunachaleswara Temple. He climbed the tower, but before he was able to jump, Lord Murugan manifested before him and held him back. In some versions of the

story, Arunagirinatha actually jumped and Murugan had to catch him before he died on the paving stones below.

Murugan embraced him. Then, with his *vel*, (the spear that he always carries) he wrote a *mantra* on Arunagirinatha's tongue, gave him a *japa mala* and commanded him to sing songs in praise of him. Arunagirinatha was initially hesitant, claiming that he had no knowledge of Tamil prosody, but when Murugan encouraged him by giving him the first line of a song, Arunagirinatha found that he could effortlessly compose and sing the remainder. Murugan disappeared, leaving Arunagirinatha a totally transformed man. His diseases vanished and he became an ecstatic *bhakta* whose devotion manifested as a stream of new songs, all in praise of Murugan, his deliverer. He toured the town of Tiruvannamalai, composing and singing songs as he went. Later on, he travelled throughout India, still singing his songs, and visited many of the country's famous pilgrimage centres. Traditional accounts say that he composed more than 16,000 songs in praise of Murugan. Most of them have been lost, but more than 1,300 of the surviving ones have been collected together in a work called *Tiruppugazh* (*The Glory of God*), which has now become one of the classics of Tamil devotional literature.

So much for the traditional account. If one turns from this to the historical evidence and the biographical and cultural references in Arunagirinatha's poetry, one is likely to conclude that this account, though it contains a large germ of truth, has been greatly embellished and sensationalised.

From one reference in the *Tiruppugazh* it is clear that Arunagirinatha came from a Hindu family whose ancestral deity was Murugan:

O Skanda [Murugan]! Glorious God of the hills! Pray bestow your blessings, accepting the ardent worship of this humble son to you, my ancestral deity.(1)

Though there is little doubt that the verses of the *Tiruppugazh* were brought into existence by divine inspiration, a study of their contents reveals that Arunagirinatha was a highly educated man. His songs exhibit a familiarity with the *Tevarams*, the *Tirukkural* and numerous other Tamil scriptural and philosophical works. His compositions are also sprinkled with Sanskrit words and expressions which indicate that he had studied the *Itihasas*, the *Puranas*, the *Gita*, the *Upanishads*, the *Agamas* and the *Mantra* and *Tantra Sastras*. Some commentators feel that the vast erudition he shows in his compositions indicates that he must have come from a family of brahmin pandits. It is not therefore likely that he was the son of a courtesan, for with such a background he would not have received a scholarly education. It was the lot of many learned men in Arunagirinatha's day to earn their living by composing poems in praise of rich men. Arunagirinatha himself admits that he took up this profession in order to be able to afford the fees of the local prostitutes:

To me who seek the company of prostitutes all the time, spending on them whatever little money I earn by bestowing lavish praises on men who lack wisdom, who never pray to your holy feet, who are dunces, who indulge in devilish activities and who have no sense of gratitude pray, Murugan, grant me *moksha* [from all this].

One can deduce from this that he was already a reasonably

competent poet before his encounter with Murugan and that Murugan merely enhanced his talent, enabling him to compose extempore verses that were both devotional and literary masterpieces.

Some references in the *Tiruppugazh* show that he was a married man and that his immoral behaviour outraged his family and made him the laughing stock of everyone in town:

[I was] ridiculed and jeered at by my wife, by the people of the town, by the women of the place, by my father and my relatives. I was treated as a despicable person by the very people whom I have loved. With everyone scolding me or indulging in loose talk about me, my mind became confused and full of gloom. I thought within myself, 'Is it for this that I strove to obtain this human body which is a treasure indeed?'

This mention of his family seems to contradict the traditional story that casts him as an orphan who frittered away his inheritance on sensory indulgences.

Arunagirinatha was clearly aware that his immoral behaviour was sinful in the sight of God. In one of his verses he lamented: 'Will I ever get to know how to attain your holy feet before becoming too old? I am wasting my youth by indulging in sinful and sexual pleasures.'

His life took a change for the better when he came into contact with an unknown *mahatma* who advised him to meditate on Lord Murugan. Arunagirinatha at first ignored the advice, but after some time he began to meditate in the manner prescribed by the *mahatma*. For several hours each day he sat in front of an image of Murugan, but his mind, weakened by years of dissipation, was unable to concentrate for any length of time. In despair Arunagirinatha decided to end his life. It was at this opportune moment that Lord Murugan appeared on a dancing peacock, halted him in the act and took possession of him. There is no support in any of Arunagirinatha's verses for the well-known story that his suicide attempt was precipitated by his sister's offer of her body, nor is it indicated anywhere that his chosen method of suicide was to jump off one of the *gopurams*. However, the attempted suicide and the divine intervention that prevented it are clearly documented:

When I was about to shed life from my body, out of compassion for me and to elevate me to a better and praiseworthy status, you came upon the scene, dancing, accompanied by your celestial devotees and showered grace on me.

In some of his other verses Arunagirinatha attempted to convey the joy that this first *darshan* brought to him and the transforming effect that it had on his mind:

The *kadamba* garland that he wore suffused me with its cloying fragrance. My breath was held. His moon-like countenance and tender smile caused such joy and ecstasy that my mind was lost. The moment he looked at me a cool liquid light poured out from his long lotus eyes. It filled my heart, tasting like nectar, and I was lost to him forever.

Overwhelmed by the experience, Arunagirinatha surrendered wholeheartedly to Lord Murugan and resolved to keep an

awareness of the Lord's name continuously in his mind:

O mind of mine, it's good you decided to surrender. See him on his peacock *vahana*. He has now taken charge of you. Doubt not, there is no greater state. Dwell on his holy name always

After his dramatic conversion Arunagirinatha made extensive tours of India, singing Murugan's praises and repeating his name. On many occasions during his travels his devotion was rewarded when Murugan appeared to him in the form of a vision. It is worth examining some of these verses that he sang, for they give a revealing insight into his spiritual state, his beliefs and the practices he enjoined on others.

We can begin with a description of his own exalted state. In the following verse he recalls how he transcended his dualistic relationship with God and established himself in the supreme state of Self. As Ramana Maharshi would do centuries later, he utilised the term '*mauna*' or 'silence' to convey the essence of this indescribable state:

It [*mauna*] has no length and breadth and its extent cannot be comprehended by anyone. [It is] where everything becomes clear. No longer engaged in outward *puja*, I experienced profound wisdom and spread flowers of joyous love. Can I [now] worship that form of Siva which is beyond the *Vedas*, beyond thought and speech, beyond conscious self-effort and beyond, beyond all subtle desires?

Arunagirinatha never stated explicitly how long it took him to attain this realisation; he merely said that it came about sometime after his first encounter with Lord Murugan:

The appointed day of Yama's coming having passed by, the desire to be always sporting with women having left me, having cut asunder the troubles caused by the five senses, I began to sing the glory of your lotus feet. I meditated upon you, O Lord of Tiruchendur [Murugan], and having come to know you, wisdom dawned upon me. O Kanda, I have known you, known you well. Going on the path of inner experience, I attained the true knowledge, destroying the I-am-the-doer sense at its root. [Afterwards], the ever-functioning mind was dead. Speech ceased to be

Although Arunagirinatha seems to have realised the Self fairly quickly, probably because of his latent spiritual maturity, he recognised that most devotees could only progress slowly, step by step. Like many other teachers before and after him, he told such people that they should first learn to quieten their minds:

Before I go down the steps of the *bhakti* ghat to bathe in the sea of *ananda*, the restless waves of the mind, free of all silt, must first subside.

To effect this subsidence Arunagirinatha recommended that devotees should live a life of purity and follow traditional practices:

By engaging in charity, by observance of festivals, by external worship of God; by the study of scriptures, by the control of the senses, by purity of thought and action, by observance of *dharma*, by adopting an attitude of compassion, and lastly, by rendering personal service to

the Guru, one soon attains purity of mind.

When these practices mature, the grace of the Lord manifests in full measure and takes one to the goal:

Control your mind, give up anger, always perform charity, remain in the sattvic state of repose, free from *rajas* and *tamas*. *Jnana Vel* [the spear of *jnana* wielded by Murugan] of its own accord, without seeking or effort, will [then] bestow its grace on you.

Having been transformed by the grace of the Lord from a life of debauchery to a state of Self-knowledge, Arunagirinatha could speak with authority on the redeeming power of grace, the necessity of surrender, and the effectiveness of meditating on the name and form of the Lord. As a result of his own experiences Arunagirinatha clearly felt that the path of devotion and surrender was the easiest and most direct route to God. He therefore discouraged his listeners from engaging in other practices, deeming them to be either counter-productive or futile. For example, in several of his verses, written from the standpoint of a devotee, he makes very blunt and outspoken remarks about the uselessness of traditional yoga practices. In other places he is equally negative about pandits and philosophers who get bogged down in intellectual disputes about religion.

The practice of yoga to make the body steady by controlling the breath, the awakening of the fire [*kundalini*] in the solar plexus and the resulting preoccupation with such practices that cause mental anxiety should be given up. I should strive to control the five senses of the body by rooting out their mischief completely. I should give up the sense of doership. I desire to attain the *mauna* state where there is no feeling of insufficiency, the brahmic state of non-differentiation and the house of *moksha* by surrendering at the lotus feet of God Kumara [Murugan].

I have had enough of the company of those persons belonging to one or the other of the six religious faiths, shouting, doubting, disputing, asserting and debating with each other about the superiority of the tenets of their respective faiths. Also [I have had enough] of those who have only taught themselves for the purpose of engaging in such controversies or for the sole purpose of performing ritualistic worship. Enough also of those who spend their times in mantras and calculations concerning *yantras* and *chakras*, their layouts with angles and junctions as found in *Siva Tantras* and *Agamas*. O Lord Murugan! Grant me *moksha* without my having to meander by fruitless and circuitous routes.

O yogis, by concentrating your two eyes on the tip of your nose and by controlling your breath from the *muladhara* to the head so that not even a single breath goes out of your body, you are trying to get *moksha*. You have forgotten to follow the easier and simpler way. If you concentrate your mind on Vallinayaka's [Murugan's] feet, it is easy to get *moksha*.

I do not want to be a foolish yogi by practising the control of respiration and consuming large quantities of herbs and roots, hoping to preserve and protect this

mortal body as long as one wishes. Bless me, O Muruga, to avoid the ordeals of such disciplines that produce a certain rigidity by *mala maya* [the contaminating power of *maya*] and instead lead me to a daily life disciplined by *jnana* and possessed of religious piety. Bless me further, O Lord, to become a great yogi established in the reality of Siva, a state without differentiation of the Self from the objects around.

Next: [The biographies of Arunagirinatha contain another story in which the central event is a competition](#)

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(1) All the translations of Arunagirinatha's poems in this article have come from *Saint Arunagirinatha*, by Swami Anavananda, published by Pongi Publications, Madras, 1975. Two translated extracts are from *Kandar Alankaram*, while the remainder are from *Tiruppugazh*.



The Kili Gopuram in the Arunachaleswara Temple

After his extensive pilgrimages, encompassing at least 200 towns, Arunagirinatha finally returned, settled down in Tiruvannamalai and spent the remainder of his life there. The traditional story of his life includes several incidents that took place during this period either in the Arunachaleswara Temple or nearby. In the first of these stories Pravuda Devaraya, the local king, invited him to appear in court because he had heard of Arunagirinatha's high reputation as both a poet and a saint. Arunagirinatha, who had no interest in the affairs of the world, ignored the invitation. Pravuda Devaraya, who had a high regard for scholars and *sadhus*, then came in person and requested that Arunagirinatha come for a visit to the royal palace. Arunagirinatha, noticing that the king was a devout man, accepted the invitation, went to the palace for a visit and had several honours bestowed on him by the king.

In the court of this king there was a famous scholar, Sambandandan, who had a tendency to boast both about his spiritual attainments and his religious knowledge. He had managed to establish himself as a favourite of the king, so when he heard about the reception accorded to Arunagirinatha he felt that his position in court might be threatened. His jealousy motivated him to hatch a plot against Arunagirinatha that he hoped would belittle his new rival in the eyes of the king. Sambandandan had done great tapas earlier in his life, so much so that he had obtained a boon from Kali, his *ishta devata* (chosen deity), that for a period of twelve years she would appear before him whenever he summoned her. Knowing that he could call on Kali to appear at any time, Sambandandan proposed to the king that he and Arunagirinatha should have competition in which each would try to make his chosen deity manifest in a form that would be visible to everyone. Sambandandan not only persuaded the king to agree to the competition, he also persuaded him to add a stipulation that the loser of the competition should leave the kingdom and never return. Although the king agreed to the rules of the competition, it seems that he did not pass on the full details to Arunagirinatha. He merely told him that he had organised a competition in which the two devotees would try to summon their favourite deities.

Arunagirinatha agreed to take part, saying that if Lord Murugan could be persuaded to appear, he would give the king *darshan* and bless him.

The competition was held in public in the Arunachaleswara Temple. Sambandandan, full of confidence, undertook to manifest his God first. To the accompaniment of great pomp and ceremony, he called on Kali to appear, but for some reason she refused to manifest herself. In some versions of the story it is said that the twelve-year period of the boon had expired the previous day, so she was no longer under any obligation to appear. Since Sambandandan was still able to communicate with her, even though he could not make her appear, he got a promise from her that she would hold Murugan tightly in her arms so that he would be unable to manifest when Arunagirinatha called on him.

Arunagirinatha began his attempt by singing a song. After praising Murugan at length in verse form, he summoned him to appear:

O Lord Murugan who resides in the heart of Pravuda
Devaraya in such a way as to make it dance with joy! O
Lord of Lords! Come dancing, O Lord, come dancing in
such a way that when you dance, everything dances

In some versions of the story Murugan manifests immediately, but in other accounts he fails to appear because he is being held tightly by his mother, Kali. In the version in which Murugan is restrained, Arunagirinatha devised a strategy to counter Kali's influence. He first sang another song that was so entrancing, Kali unconsciously began to loosen her grip on her son. When Arunagirinatha sensed that this was happening, he sang a different song that summoned Murugan's *vahana*, his peacock, to appear and dance before Murugan and Kali. The peacock promptly appeared and danced in such an enticing way, Kali momentarily forgot to hold on tightly to Murugan. At this crucial moment Murugan leapt out of her arms, mounted his peacock and entered the physical world through one of the pillars of a *mantapam* in the Arunachaleswara Temple. A temple has since been built around this column to commemorate this great event. The manifestation of Lord Murugan was so dazzling, the light he emanated caused Pravuda Devaraya, the king, to lose his eyesight.

This traditional story is so full of improbable events, it would be tempting to dismiss the whole episode as quaint myth. However, the central event of the story, the manifestation of Lord Murugan in public in response to Arunagirinatha's pleas, finds some corroboration in two verses from the *Tiruppugazh*:

In the midst of the assembly of your devotees who
deserved your compassion You came once in
Tiruvannamalai

O Victor on the peacock! You came to my help in
Tiruvannamalai in a way that people of the world can
perceive and praise your great compassion.

There is no mention of a competition in any of the verses, nor are the activities of Sambandandan and Kali alluded to, but there seems to be enough textual evidence to suggest that, prompted by Arunagirinatha, Murugan appeared, mounted on a peacock, before a large assembly of people, including the king, who had gathered there with the express purpose of determining whether or not Arunagirinatha could make his chosen deity appear.

The biographies of Arunagirinatha contain another story in which the central event is a competition. A contemporary of Arunagirinatha, an erudite scholar and staunch Vaishnava called Villiputhurar, was responsible for translating the *Mahabharata* into Tamil verse. This man was so confident that he was a better scholar than anyone else, he toured around the country, challenging all the pandits he met to engage in scholarly competition with him. It is doubtful whether many people accepted his challenge because Villiputhurar made it a condition of the competition that the loser should have his ears cut off. Hearing of Arunagirinatha's fame as an extempore poet, he came to Tiruvannamalai and challenged him to a poetry competition. Under the rules of this contest, Arunagirinatha had to compose extempore verses that Villiputhurar undertook to explain. If Arunagirinatha could compose a verse that Villiputhurar could not ascertain the meaning of, the latter would concede defeat and agree to have his ears cut off. Arunagirinatha in return agreed that he would have his own ears cut off if he failed to produce a verse that baffled Villiputhurar.

The competition began with Arunagirinatha composing the verses of a poem that later became known as *Kandar Antadi*. Villiputhurar easily deciphered the meaning of the first fifty-three verses, but could make no sense of verse fifty-four. It was a cunningly designed verse, a masterpiece of alliterative prosody in which the meaning was deeply buried inside a succession of apparently meaningless syllables, all of which began with the sound of 't.' The genius of the Tamil language is such that it can juxtapose a long series of root-words and substantives to provide the equivalent of what in an Indo-European language would be a complex, compound sentence, with several sub-clauses. This it can do without resort to either case and verb endings, or prepositions and suffixes. Although such elements are available if required, they occur sparingly in classical Tamil usage, with the result that richness and allusiveness of meaning are combined with great economy of expression. A second result is, of course, that it is often difficult to deduce the grammatical relations between the component elements of such an utterance, especially since a single Tamil word may have as many as ten or fifteen secondary meanings. There is no separation of words in written Tamil. This, combined with the elision of a final 'u' before a following vowel, and the various transformations of consonants appearing in both final and initial positions, often causes extreme difficulty in dividing any given utterance into its discrete component elements.

However, under normal circumstances, a Tamil poet of the standing of Villiputhurar might be expected to reel off the meaning of any verses Arunagirinatha could produce. Villiputhurar would be able to recognise individual words by the very diversity of their consonants. He would then resolve the *sandhi* of the final and initial letters, deduce the grammatical relations of the various words and give the correct meaning.

Arunagirinatha, therefore, resorted to the expedient of composing a whole four-line verse using only one consonant (Tamil has twenty-two native consonants). This he was able to do by utilising the vast fund of synonyms available to him, and by combining them without affixal or suffixal connections. The result was a seamless, apparently meaningless stream of 't' sounds with a following vowel. When Arunagirinatha explained the meaning of

the verse, Villiputhurar admitted that he had been defeated. Arunagirinatha, who lacked the vindictive streak that characterised Villiputhurar, allowed the latter to keep his ears.

There is one other well-known story about Arunagirinatha that is so incredible, almost nobody nowadays takes it seriously. After Sambandandan, the man who had failed to make Kali appear, had lost his competition with Arunagirinatha, he tried to get revenge by hatching another plot.

He went to the king, who had been blinded by the *darshan* of Murugan, and told him: 'If your highness can persuade Arunagirinatha to bring a *parijata* flower from *svargaloka* [one of the heavenly worlds], a few drops squeezed from the flower onto your eyes will restore your eyesight.'

The king, eager to regain his vision, commissioned Arunagirinatha to do the job. In order to reach the heavenly world, Arunagirinatha entered the body of a parrot that had recently died and reanimated it. He left his own body in one of the niches of a *gopuram* in the Arunachaleswara Temple and flew off to collect the flower. After the parrot had departed on its mission, Sambandandan, who had been watching Arunagirinatha's movements, showed the lifeless body of the poet to Pravuda Devaraya, announced that it was dead, and asked for permission to cremate it. The king agreed and the body was quickly burned. Some time later Arunagirinatha returned with the flower only to discover that he no longer had a human body to return to. He went to the king in his parrot body, restored his eyesight with the *parijata* flower juice and explained what had happened. Realising that he had been tricked, the king was struck with grief because he knew that it would now be impossible for Arunagirinatha to resume a human form again. Arunagirinatha, on the other hand, was untroubled by this bizarre turn of events. He happily spent the remainder of his life in the parrot's body and even continued to compose poetry in praise of Lord Murugan. It is said that he composed and sang his famous work *Kandar Anubhuti* and several other poems while he was still occupying the parrot's body. If this story were true, there ought to be some reference to his startling physical transformation in his later works. The lack of any such reference has convinced most people that the whole story is an imaginative embroidery on the original, more documented, incident of Murugan manifesting out of a pillar in the Arunachaleswara Temple.

If his life did not end in this improbable way, what finally did happen to him? Sambandandan, Villiputhurar, Pravuda Devaraya and Arunagirinatha were all people who left imprints on the historical record. If one compares their dates and collates all the facts that are known about them, it is possible to come to the conclusion that Arunagirinatha lived about seventy-five years from around A.D. 1330 to A.D. 1405. There is evidence in his poetry that he lived to such an age, for in the following verse, which summarises the main events of his life, he is clearly looking back on a very long and distinguished career:

By your precious gift to me of singing the songs so beautifully named as *Tiruppugazh*, I have been blessed with the eternal vision that knows no decay or diminution. [I have] also gained insight into the truth enunciated in great writings, Sunk as I was in ignorance,

this heinous sinner, by the merit of singing *Tiruppugazh*, has crossed the ocean of desire and reached a place indescribable by speech. It has earned me great name and good fame, has made me traverse the seven worlds, and now mere wishes of mine, once uttered, carry the weight of a king's command, Leaving these aside, how can I forget you for the very precious gift which has taken me beyond the ocean of sorrow, beyond the three *gunas*, beyond all *vasanas* and freed me from rebirth forever

Some of Arunagirinatha's poems can be found on this site in the sections entitled [*Perutta Vachanam*](#) and [*Kandar Anubhuti*](#).

Kandar Anubhuti

Kandar Anubhuti is a fifty-two verse poem, rich in mythological symbolism, in which Arunagirinatha frequently refers to his quest for God and his subsequent experience of him. Some of the key verses are given below. The title can be translated as '*The Direct Experience of Skanda*'.

2

O Lord, God of the *deva* realm!(1) Are you not joyous, carefree, unsorrowing, the great yogi, the one who desires the good of all beings, the one who is possessed of kind speech, and the one who performs divine dramas? O Murugan! I beg you, please enlighten me about the experience of liberation in which everything ceases to exist, that good state in which the sense of 'mine' is lost.

3

O Shanmukha!(2) What is reality? Is it the earth, water, fire, air or ether? Is it the state in which knowledge arises? Is it the chanting of the *Vedas*? Is it the 'I' principle or the mind? Or is it that place where 'I' was accepted?(3)

12

Glorious Murugan, deathless and unborn! Thief who kidnapped Valli, she who was born to a red deer!(4) When he through silence instructed me 'Be silent!', what a wonder! I was unable to cognise even a single external object.

13

Neither with form nor without it; neither existence nor non-existence; neither darkness nor light; that Absolute Reality is Murugan, our Guru, he who wields the incomparable *vel*.(5) Is there any possibility of knowing him except through his grace?

14

O Mind! Abandon, abandon the desires that venture out through the five gates of the body, the mouth, the eyes, the nostrils and the ears. Surrendering at the feet of Lord Murugan, who wields the *vel* in his hands, take the path to salvation.

20

Beloved One! Mighty Lord! Primordial sound of *Om*! Protector and saviour of the *deva* realm! O Great One who gave me *upadesa* in the form of a direct experience. This slave gained that Supreme Reality, the most difficult of all to attain. How wonderful!

22

O Lord who bows to the feet of Valli, the one with beautiful hair! (6) O Murugan, Lord of the *devas*, great as Mount Meru!(7) What a wonder! By meditating on you in the form of Kumara, the eternal youth,(8) and by bowing to your lotus feet, I have been blessed with the attainment of true *tapas*.

27

In the past, greatly did I cherish a way of life that was as transient as lightning. Now, is this the fruit born of my fate? O King! O God mounted on the peacock! You are gold, you are gems, you are grace divine, the real wealth.

28

Untainted divine nectar! King with the piercing *vel*! Embodiment of *jnana*! What else can I say? The Transcendental Reality swallowed the 'me', the individual self, leaving That alone which is mere existence.

30

Lord Murugan, wielder of the *vel*, whose form shines like the crimson sky! On that day you revealed to me the unique divine experience. Having it and experiencing it is the only way to understand it. Is it something to talk about? How can it be told to someone else?

31

You decreed that I should fall into the mire of *maya* and lead a useless life in this way. Have I, in my previous life, done anything despicable to deserve this? O peacock-mounted God, may you prosper ever after!

34

O Shanmukha, child of the Ganga! Abode of grace! Mighty warrior! Possessor of the peacock! Please grant me the boon that my mind and intellect may not be dimmed by the evil of pursuing beautiful women.

37

I am the close associate of the Lord,(9) he who threw his mighty *vel* at the mountain.(10) O mind, long to attain that knowledge called serenity that kills the ego and uproots it entirely.

40

Murugan, you who roamed, looking for Valli, all over hills covered with pools and green fields of millet with their lookout perches. I will not forget the sharp *vel* that expelled evil from me. Should I remain deluded by this samsaric life?

42

In a state of thinking without thinking, the incomparable *vel* bestowed on me knowledge of the Ultimate. As soon as it was granted to me, my relationship with the world was severed; speech and mind ceased, along with ignorance and knowledge.

43

Beloved of the one [Valli] who is adorned with beautiful clothes and precious gems! By your love and by your grace the fettering desires have been broken and reduced to dust. Out of that was born the magnificent, speechless, direct experience of you!

48

O Lord, do you not inseparably stand in the intellect of those in whom every kind of knowledge has ceased? Their relationships have come to nothing, their darkness has been destroyed. Lord of the *vel*! You abide forever in those who have conquered delusion.

49

That which alone is is to be realised by oneself. How can this be described to anyone else? Lord of manifold forms who wields the sparkling light of the *vel*! Divine resplendence enveloped in grace! You remove the misery of those who think of you.

(1) Though Indra is traditionally regarded as being the king of the *devas*, Arunagirinatha assigns this role to Murugan in order to pursue a complex spiritual analogy. In Arunagirinatha's scheme the *devas* represent the various bodily functions. They keep the mind and the body in a state of sattvic harmony and are presided over by Indra, who represents the *prana*, the animating and sustaining life force in the body. A demon called Surapadma symbolises both the ego and the hostile forces that try to overthrow or destroy the state of physical and mental well being that the *devas*, under Indra, have engendered. When they temporarily succeed, mental misery and disease result. When the *devas* appeal to their ultimate Lord, Murugan, for assistance, he intervenes and restores the sattvic status quo by destroying the evil forces.

Mythologically, Surapadma was a demon who tried to fight Murugan. When

he took the form of a tree, Murugan split him into two. One of the two parts was transformed by Murugan into the peacock that eventually became his *vahana* or vehicle, while the other half was transformed into the cock that Murugan holds aloft as a banner or emblem.

(2) Murugan was created from light that came out of Siva's third eye. Siva gathered this light in his hands and passed it on to Vayu, the god of wind. The power of the light was too much for him so he gave it to Agni, the god of fire, who deposited it in the Ganges. Ganga, the goddess of the Ganges, was also unable to bear the power so she carried it to a small pond and left it there. In this pond the light transformed itself into six babies. Parvati subsequently joined the babies together in a form that had one trunk, twelve arms and six faces. This is Lord Shanmukha, 'The Lord with Six Faces'. Because he was born from Siva's third eye, 'the eye of wisdom', he stands for divine knowledge and is held to be an incarnation of pure consciousness. His name Skanda means 'the joined one', a reference to the way Parvati amalgamated his bodies. It can also mean, 'one who was ejected' or 'one who leaped out', a reference to the light that emanated from Siva's third eye.

Arunagirinatha most probably obtained his mythological information on Murugan, and its symbolic significance, from the *Kanda Puranam*, a fourteenth century Tamil text by Kacchiyappa Sivachariar that gives extensive information on the Skanda avatara. There it is written:

That mass of consciousness, which is called 'The Supreme *Brahman*', which is formless and also with form, which is beginningless, who is the One and also the many, assumed a form with six grace-showing faces and twelve hands and took *avatara* as Murugan for the redemption of the world.

(3) These seem to be rhetorical questions. The implied answer is that Reality is the place or state where the fully surrendered 'I' was destroyed. Arunagirinatha offered his 'I' to God. In the Heart, the place where God accepted the offer, Arunagirinatha found reality.

(4) Cursed by the *rishi* Kanva, Vishnu and his consort Lakshmi were once wandering in a forest in the forms of Sivamuni, a speechless saint, and a deer. Once, as they were gazing lovingly at each other, the deer became pregnant and later gave birth to a human child. Abandoned by her mother because she was not a deer, she was found by Nambirajan, a hunter-king, and adopted as his daughter. She was named Valli after the place (Vallikkodi) where she was found. In her previous life as Sundaravalli she had fallen in love with Murugan and had obtained a boon from him that she would become his consort. As she grew up her devotion to Murugan increased until no other thought occupied her mind. Unable to resist her one-pointed devotion, Murugan appeared before her in the form of a hunter, tested her devotion, accepted her, and later married her.

Devotees of Murugan regard Valli as the universal mother who is always occupied with the welfare of devotees. She knows how pure and evolved each *jiva* is, and she brings to Murugan's attention all the mature souls who are ready to be released from *samsara*.

In a more general sense Valli's spiritual career symbolises the progress of all advanced souls who are on the final stage of their journey to God. First, there is intense devotion. When that devotion matures, God appears in the form of Guru and tests the readiness of the devotee. If the devotee is accepted, the divine marriage takes place.

(5) The *vel* is the spear-like weapon with which Murugan destroyed his enemies during his physical *avatara*. At the symbolic level it is *jnana-sakti*, the power that destroys ignorance and wrong knowledge in his devotees. When the demons invade the body and the mind obscuring *sattva* and threatening the *prana* itself (see the note to verse two), Murugan wields his *vel* to destroy the invading enemies.

The *vel* is the look of grace that the Guru bestows on the devotee. It pierces and destroys the ego, its target, and bestows *jnana*. In one of his verses Ramana Maharshi describes Murugan as, 'The six-faced Lord who came on earth in order to bestow his own state by destroying the karmas of those seeking refuge at his feet and who plays the game of throwing the spear which is the glance of *jnana*' (*The Mountain Path*, 1984, p. 94)

(6) When Murugan appeared before Valli, he first tested her devotion. She passed the tests so successfully, Murugan prostrated to her and placed his head on her feet. Murugan *bhaktas*, in interpreting this event, say that God becomes the slave of all those who can demonstrate pure and complete devotion to him.

(7) Meru is a mythological mountain, said to be the greatest on earth. Its

dimensions are incalculable. It is regarded as the axis of the earth.

(8) Kumara, 'the eternal youth' is one of the many names of Murugan. Since it has the meaning, 'the one who destroys *maya*,' it also signifies the power of the Self. Arunagirinatha is saying that by meditating on the formless *sakti* and by surrendering to the divine he discovered the real nature of *tapas*. In this context the 'eternal youth' is not merely the ever-young form of Murugan, it is the eternal consciousness that he represents.

(9) An '*iraiyon parivaram*' is a close associate of the Lord. The term denotes someone who has come close enough to God to have a direct experience of him.

(10) This refers to one of the major events in Murugan's *avatara*. Krauncha was one of the lieutenants of the *asura* Taraka, who was the younger brother of Surapadma. Krauncha used to assume the form of a mountain, with many paths leading to it. When passers-by, particularly *sadhus* and sages, came near, Krauncha would kill them.

The sage Agastya, who was travelling near the mountain, avoided the fate of the other sages by intuitively understanding ahead of time the danger of going near Krauncha. He cursed the *asura*, telling him that he would have to remain in the shape of the mountain until he was destroyed by the *vel* of Murugan.

When Murugan led the *deva* army on his southward march to attack Surapadma, he encountered Krauncha en route and destroyed him with his *vel*.

Krauncha represents the mount of karma that cannot be moved or destroyed by any force other than the *vel*, the *jnana-sakti* of the Lord. Surapadma represents the ego and the state of ignorance in general. Both have to be eradicated by the 'glance of grace'.

The first half of the verse indicates that Murugan has already thrown 'his mighty *vel*' at Arunagirinatha's mountain of karma, thereby destroying it. The second half of the verse can therefore be taken to be advice to others, calling on them to attain that serene state in which the work of the *vel* can be effective.

Perutta Vachanam

Among Arunagirinatha's lesser-known works is *Tiru Vakappu*, which can be roughly translated as 'Holy Sections'. The twenty-five sub-divisions that give the work its name mostly deal with different aspects of Murugan - his consorts, his peacock *vahana*, the *vel*, etc. One section, though, stands out as being unique among his works. Entitled *Perutta Vachanam* (*Great Spiritual Words or Great Spiritual Truths*), it is almost wholly advaitic in character. There are no pleas for grace, no complaints about uncontrollable desires, just a series of statements about the nature of reality in both its manifest and unmanifest state. Speaking from direct experience and with unwavering authority, Arunagirinatha proclaims the final truth that everything is That and That alone.

1

Within and beyond the three worlds
Traversed by the sun,
What fills everything
As the happy essence is That.

2

The blissful silence controlling
The many mental modes, again making
Everything blossom forth, is only That.

3

The foolish and vain votaries of the six faiths (1)
Debate fanatically and prattle aloud;
What lies beyond all such differing conceptions is That.

4

For those who wallow and sink
In the dark mire of the three impurities,
My and mine, *karma* and *maya*,
What helps them cross over the useless ways is That.

5

The Guru of Lord Siva,
Who wears the ark and cassia flowers on his head,
Is our Lord Murugan who manifests as That. (2)

6

The amounts of good and bad deeds,
Added up, make this dirty body of ours.
Subtracting our identification with it,
What becomes the answer, defying comparison, is That.

7

Not even all the learning and arts,
Beginning from the *Rig Veda*,
Will be a counter-balance
If weighed against That.

8

When messengers of the Lord of Death
Come for one at the time of death,
What endows one with a natural ability
To cross over to safety is That.

9

Where the thickly-set *Upanishads* end,
At that edge, what exists alone as the crest is That.

10

Without form, what lies concealed,
The core and essence
Of fire, earth, ether, wind and water,
Which fill things, nought left out, is That.

11

Thought, object and thinker vanish:
What evolves in the state where
One abides forever is That.

12

To the unwavering devotees, their hesitancy gone,
Released from all troubles,
The precious treasure they enjoy is That.

13

What makes thought, word and deed lie submerged,
Making it possible to experience that joy
Of bathing in the divine grace, is That.

14

As the light of lights, as space beyond space
And as the life of lives,
What manifests for ever and ever is That.

15

Lord Shanmukha, the valorous one!
He rode on the strong peerless peacock
To fight the *asuras* who ran and hid themselves.
He married the hunter girl who wore a dress
Fashioned of beautiful foliage. It was he,
The incomparable one, who graciously taught me That.

(1) The six major cults of Hinduism (*shanmata*), codified and sanctioned by Adi Sankaracharya are the worship of (1) Siva (2) Vishnu (3) Devi or Sakti (4) Ganapati (5) Kumara (6) Surya, the sun. In *Kandar Anubhuti*, verse forty-seven, Arunagirinatha says, 'Transcending the six religions, am I blessed to attain as divine fortune that Supreme State which is beyond [them all]?'

(2) On one occasion Murugan imparted a secret *upadesa* on *pranava* (the sound of *Om*) to Siva and thus earned the title 'Guru of Siva'. The flowers are the ornaments of Siva, not Murugan.

King Vallalan of Tiruvannamalai

(Parts of this article were first published in *The Mountain Path*,
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King Vira Vallalan III was an illustrious king who ruled over the Hoysala empire from 1292 till 1342. At its peak it covered a large part of South India. Its traditional stronghold was the southern part of the Deccan plateau where the capital city Dwarasamudra was located. The city, nowadays reduced to a very small town called Halebid, lay to the north-west of Mysore. Though now ruined and abandoned, the old city contains the finest examples of Hoysala art and architecture, a unique style distinguished by a high density of details and embellishments. When times were good and neighbouring kingdoms were weak, the Hoysala empire covered most of modern-day Karnataka, northern Andhra Pradesh, and a good portion of northern Tamil Nadu.

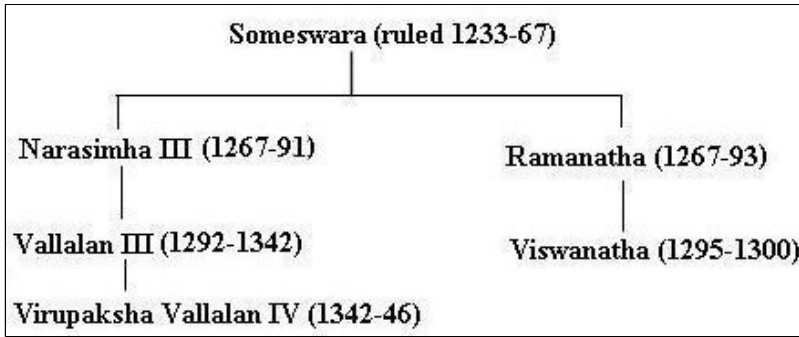
King Vallalan's devotion and piety are celebrated in chapter seven of the *Arunachala Purananam*, a Tamil poetical work that was written in the sixteenth century by Ellapa Nayinar. The work is based on the *Arunachala Mahatmyam*, written several centuries before in Sanskrit, but the chapter dealing with King Vallalan and his exploits in Tiruvannamalai can only be found in the Tamil version. To find out why he is so revered in Tiruvannamalai, and indeed, why he was in Tiruvannamalai at all, it is necessary to go back a few years and give an account of his family history.

King Vallalan's grandfather, Someswara, ruled the empire from 1233-67. At the beginning of his reign he recaptured territory lost by the previous king, extended his kingdom northwards as far as Pandharpur in Maharashtra, and endowed the famous Vittal Temple there. In the later years of his reign both his northern and southern territories were attacked by neighbouring kingdoms. The resurgent Pandya kings of Madurai, in particular Sundara Pandya, took over much of his Tamil territory, including Tiruvannamalai, which was then part of a territory known as Magada. This covered most of the old, undivided North Arcot District, along with a small portion of South Arcot. Towards the end of his life Someswara divided his kingdom between his two sons: Narasimha received the northern territories and the capital city Dwarasamudra, while Ramanatha was given the diminished southern ones whose chief city was Kannanur, located about fifteen miles north of Tiruchirappalli. The Pandya King Kulasekara, based in Madurai, captured most of Ramanatha's Tamil territories in 1279, forcing him north. Ramanatha then tried to take some of his brother's territories by force, but only succeeded in capturing a few districts in the Bangalore area.



*A statue of King
Vallalan, located in a
niche of a gopuram in
the Arunachaleswara
Temple*

(Click on image to
enlarge)



Family tree of the last Hoysala kings. The dynasty began in 1022 and ended with Vallalan IV.

Narasimha died in 1291, leaving King Vallalan in charge of a much truncated empire. Vallalan was crowned king on 31st January, 1292, when he was thirty years old, and he continued to rule until he was well over eighty.

Ramanatha, ruler of what remained of the southern Hoysala territories, did not dispute King Vallalan's succession, although both he and his son were hostile to him. However, because they had little power and only a small territory, when Viswanatha died in 1300, Vallalan easily succeeded in uniting the Hoysala empire under his rule.

Vallalan wanted to regain his family's southern territories, but was in no hurry to do so. However, in 1310 an opportunity arose. His grandfather, Someswara, had made strategic marriage alliances with the Chola and Pandya kingdoms in the South, so when the Pandyas requested his assistance in defeating an illegitimate claimant to their throne, he saw his chance and moved his army south. Unfortunately, in committing himself to this campaign he left himself open to an attack in the north.

In 1311 the Delhi Sultan, Ala-u-din Khalji sent his favourite slave general, Malik Khafur, on a buccaneering expedition to the kingdoms of the South. Knowing that King Vallalan was campaigning on the extreme southern borders of his empire, he invaded from the north and began to loot the northernmost Hoysala territories. When King Vallalan heard the news, he raced back to Dwarasamudra, but he was too late to save the city. Malik Khafur was so firmly entrenched there, King Vallalan was forced to surrender on his arrival. Malik Khafur was not seeking to expand the borders of the Delhi Sultanate; he was merely engaging in a military treasure-hunt on the Sultan's behalf. King Vallalan was obliged to hand over all his treasure, including his horses and elephants, to the general. One tradition asserts that he agreed to hand over everything he owned except for his sacred thread, and that he walked away from the surrender ceremony naked except for this string dangling from his shoulder. Sultan Ala-u-din permitted him to carry on ruling the Hoysala empire on condition that he pay an annual tribute to the Sultanate. To all this King Vallalan agreed.

Malik Khafur continued his piratical raids all over the South, getting almost as far as Madurai. On his return to Delhi he handed over to the Sultan 612 elephants, 96,000 gold coins, several boxes of jewels and pearls, and 20,000 horses. It was an astonishing military accomplishment. For over a year his retreat had been cut off by hostile Hindu kingdoms, but he responded by moving even further forwards. Somehow, he kept his army and his treasure intact, won every battle he engaged in except for one near Madurai,

and returned to Delhi in triumph.

When Malik Khafur was safely back in Delhi, King Vallalan went back to Tamil Nadu to carry on his campaign for Sundara, the Pandya king who had asked for his support. As a reward for the assistance he offered, he was granted some territories in a region called Tondaimandalam, an area covering parts of northern Tamil Nadu. The grant included 'Annamalai-rashtra' - 'the country around Annamalai'. Shortly afterwards, possibly around 1315 or 1316, he decided to make Tiruvannamalai his southern capital,⁽¹⁾ calling it Aruna-samudra - The Ocean of Aruna. An epigraph in the Arunachaleswara Temple, dated 1317, has the king proclaiming the town as his southern capital. In this same inscription the king made many endowments to the temple and contributed money for building projects there.

Having a large territory to defend and expand, King Vallalan spent little time in his new capital. In the years that followed he was active on his northern borders, campaigning against a powerful chief of the Kampili kingdom. Elsewhere he had moderate success in forging an anti-Muslim alliance between the Hindu states who were trying to oppose the Muslim invasions from the North. He found allies in what is now Andhra Pradesh and with their support drove a Muslim ruler out of the Telengana region and forced him to retreat to Delhi. In the South he defeated the Muslims who were encroaching on the northern part of the Pandya kingdom. In this territory he appointed a vassal king from the Sambuvaraya lineage, native chiefs of that area, to rule for him.⁽²⁾ By diplomacy, by military prowess and by forging opportunist and strategic alliances, King Vallalan kept the Hoysala empire more or less intact at a time when all the other Hindu kingdoms were falling to the Muslims. When the Pandya kingdom fell to the Delhi Sultanate in the latter half of his reign, Hoysala was left in the somewhat besieged condition of being the last, major independent Hindu state in the South.

King Vallalan had allied himself with the Delhi Sultanate on various minor matters. As a reward he was permitted to remain independent, although he nominally owed allegiance to Delhi. But even that allegiance did not save his northern capital, Dwarasamudra. Around 1327 the new Sultan of Delhi, Muhammad Bin Tughlak sent out an army and destroyed it. For the remaining fifteen years of his reign he was based at his southern capital of Tiruvannamalai and launched all his campaigns from there.

Having set the scene with what I hope was not an inordinately-long history lecture, it is now time to see what the *Arunachala Puranam* has to say about Tiruvannamalai, King Vallalan and his exploits there. I have annotated the story with a few comments of my own.

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Now we will tell you the story of King Vallalan to whom
God Himself manifested as a child and then bestowed
His grace by giving him a boon.

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In a famous place called Arunai [Tiruvannamalai] there
are mansions with jewel-bedecked pinnacles and gardens
dense with fruit-giving trees that reach up to the starry
firmament. In this place dwell beautiful *devadasis*
[temple dancers] equal only to Arunadhathi [Vasishta's

wife] in chastity.

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Vallalan, the king of this renowned city, has a virtuous character, speaks only the truth, and with great devotion takes care of all beings as if they were no different from himself. He belongs to that Agni lineage, whose fame cannot be described. The king came [to this world] to worship daily the feet of Parameswara [the Supreme Lord], to do service to Him and to praise Him.

In claiming an aristocratic pedigree, one can do no better than claim that one comes from the Solar, Lunar or Agni lineages since these are the branches of the human race that brought forth many of the illustrious characters of Indian mythology. Ellapa Nayinar's claim that King Vallalan belonged to the Agni lineage was not supported by King Vallalan himself. In an epigraph that I quote below, he firmly places himself in the Lunar dynasty.

First a word about epigraphs: Indian history has been largely reconstructed from engravings on stone, called epigraphs after a Greek word which means 'written on', which are found all over the country. In ancient times stone walls were used as a kind of public registry office. The activities of kings and their subjects, the transfer of land and possessions, decrees, grants, endowments and much else were all recorded in stone for posterity. The Tiruvannamalai temple has a rich collection of epigraphs chiselled on its masonry, some of which date back to the ninth century. There are nine from King Vallalan's reign (nos. 301-309) (3) of which no. 301, which was only discovered in the 1980s, is by far the most important. Dated 1317, it begins by describing King Vallalan's ancestry and virtues.

From the lotus of [Vishnu's] navel arose Brahma, the creator of all men. From his mind was born Atri. Then Soma [the moon] was born in his eye. In [his family] was born the king Someswara. To him was born Narasimha who was like a lion to his elephant-like opponents. From him whose gifts eclipse those of the heavenly tree [the *kalpa-vriksha* or wish-fulfilling tree] whose wealth eclipses that of Kubera [the god of wealth] and whose prowess eclipses that of the terrible blaze emanating from the forehead eye of the God having the bull as His vehicle [i.e. Siva] was born the king Vallaladeva.(4) The illustrious King Vallaladeva, possessing all auspicious things, was staying at his capital, which was distinguished by the name Aruna-samudra, belonging to the Hoysala kingdom, which was established with love by his father,(5) which possessed the wealth of a kingdom, and which was the abode of real riches.(6)

The *Arunachala Puranam* continues:

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He had no desire for the possessions of others. Excepting his own wives, he considers all other women as his sisters and treats them accordingly. In accordance with the law, he is given one sixth of his subjects' earnings as taxes. He serves with great delight as a patron of the temple of the Lord who held the poison in His throat.

I will comment later on King Vallalan's status as a patron of 'The temple of the Lord'. For the moment I will restrict myself to

his accomplishments as a tax gatherer.

Epigraph 303, carved in 1341, towards the end of his reign, gives details of some of the taxes that were imposed on his subjects. The list may be far from complete; it is simply a list of those taxes deemed worthy of mention in one edict:

- 1) a tax on goldsmiths.
- 2) a tax on tailors.
- 3) a tax on oil presses.
- 4) a tax on looms.
- 5) a tax on fishing.
- 6) a tax on doors.
- 7) a tax on owning a mirror.
- 8) a tax on the plot of land on which one lived.
- 9) a fee payable to village rulers.
- 10) a special tax for some people who had to supply a free ox to the government.
- 11) a tax to be paid in gold - by whom and what for is not mentioned.
- 12) a general government levy under which 'common people' had to supply goods to the government.

In addition to these, which had probably been in force for some time, a new tax bearing the name of King Vallalan himself was introduced. It was not mentioned who was to pay the tax. The ordinance was promulgated on January 4th, 1341, a time when King Vallalan was living in Tiruvannamalai and using it as a base for military adventures against the Muslim rulers of Madurai. The tax may therefore have been a special war levy.

Rulers are rarely satisfied with their income, and their subjects are usually unwilling to give as much as a government thinks it needs. Tiruvannamalai in 1341 was no different in this respect. On top of all the above levies there was a '*nattuviniyokam*', a tax to be paid by everyone to make up the perceived shortfall in the other taxes. Since no percentages or amounts are given, it is not possible to determine whether the one-sixth law suggested by Ellapa Nayinar was actually adhered to.

Though the taxes may have been onerous, I suspect that the citizens of Tiruvannamalai would have welcomed the king and his entourage with open arms. Royal patronage for the temple (which meant many, many jobs) along with the chance to earn money from the thousands of soldiers, courtiers and camp followers of the king, would have initiated an economic boom in what previously would have been a sleepy, provincial outpost.

456

In this place tigers and cows dwell together, drinking from the same tank. The brahmin preceptors recite the *Vedas*, and all the people listen. To obtain grace from the ancient Lord, people decorate the city, making it a marvel to behold. Maidens sprinkle water in the street and make magnificent *kolams* [geometrical patters made from rice flour].

457

There are three rainfalls a month and the abundantly rich harvests never fail. Those who ask for food are immediately invited and offered food with the six different flavours. By serving the *tapasvins* [those performing *tapas*] and giving whatever is asked of them,

the people receive blessings. In the temple of Siva, the Just One, they light ghee lamps and do *puja* regularly.

458

Thus, the great city existed in all its splendour according to God's design. But even though the king had all possible wealth, he had a troubled mind because he had no son to speak his name.

'To speak his name' means to perform the funeral ceremonies after his death. It was traditionally believed that the son had to perform the last rites in order to send his father's soul to the next world.

The central theme of this chapter from the *Arunachala Puranam* is King Vallalan's quest for a son. This is most curious since it is well known that he already had a son at the time he moved to Tiruvannamalai. When Malik Khafur sacked Dwarasamudra in 1311, he took King Vallalan's son to Delhi as a hostage, hoping thereby to ensure the king's good behaviour. The son, Virupaksha Vallalan, was treated well during his captivity. He was released after some time and on 6th May, 1313, arrived back in Dwarasamudra. The event was commemorated in an inscription there that notes that his father diverted some of his tax income to 'God Ramanatha at Kudali' (Srirangapattanam in Mysore) to show his gratitude for his son's release. Virupaksha Vallalan eventually succeeded his father and outlived him by at least several years.

Why then was King Vallalan complaining while he was in Tiruvannamalai that he needed a son? The answer, I think, is that he wanted a *worthy* son to succeed him. King Vallalan had a very low opinion of his son's capabilities, a conclusion that can be inferred from the fact that he was given no responsibility whatsoever for the running of the kingdom. In an age when it took weeks or even months to move an army from one end of the country to another, it was imperative to have able lieutenants with leadership abilities who could lead troops in local encounters and solve all provincial administrative problems. King Vallalan had such subordinates to whom he devolved much of his authority, but his son was not among them. As early as 1309 he was depending heavily on one of his nephews and by 1328 he had a trusted cabinet of seven: two were his nephews and five were commoners. Each of them was given the power to rule autonomously in the absence of the king.



There is a Nandi *mantapam* in the Arunachaleswara Temple that

was built at King Vallalan's behest. On one side of the pedestal, below the Nandi (see picture above), can be seen eight men in two groups. One group represents the king and his two nephews; the other group of five are the non-royal members of his cabinet.

Virupaksha Vallalan was not even appointed Crown Prince until 1340, a clear indication of King Vallalan's lack of faith in him. In that year King Vallalan was seventy-eight, so he had probably given up hope of finding or fathering a better successor. King Vallalan's estimate of his son's character turned out to be correct. Within a few years of his coronation Virupaksha Vallalan IV's Hoysala empire disintegrated and was absorbed, without a fight, into the Vijayanagar empire that was developing and expanding to the north of it.

King Vallalan was an exceptionally dynamic and talented ruler. At the beginning of his reign he survived a near-civil war with his relatives, outmanoeuvred them and reunited his empire; he survived the debacles of having his capital sacked (1311) and later destroyed (1327) and then compensated for its loss by expanding his territory in other regions; he successfully maintained Hoysala independence at a time when all the neighbouring Hindu kingdoms were falling; he knew when to make alliances, and when to break them; when to submit, pay tribute and surrender, and when to attack; and on top of all this he was a successful general who knew how to fight and win battles.

For fifty years (1292-1342) he kept this up, mostly single-handedly, but at the back of his mind there must always have been the nagging question, 'Who is going to take charge when I die?' His Hoysala dynasty had endured for more than 300 years but he must have known that unless someone far more competent than Virupaksha Vallalan came along to succeed him, the empire would not endure.

One event above all symbolises for me his inability to find a worthy heir. At the age of eighty, when he should have been leading the life of a respected elder statesman in his palace, he was still riding out to battle at the head of his army because he hadn't found anyone better to do the job for him.

I shall return to the theme of the worthy successor later, but first two more verses from the *Arunachala Puranam*:

459

He asked the ministers, 'Is there anything wrong with the *pujas* I perform to Siva? Have there been any errors in my [administration of] justice in this country? Among the flowers plucked for *pūja*, are there any defective ones? O ministers, tell me what is to be done?'

460

The ministers said, 'O king, if one gives charity with steadfast faith and devotion to each and every poor person who approaches us, then by the grace of the Lord with three eyes who protects and rules us, a son will be born.'

Epigraphs in the Arunachaleswara Temple indicate that the king supported alms houses in the town. In inscription 301 there is a mention of 800 *pon* (gold coins) being set aside for the provision of 200 persons in the alms house. Inscription 302, which is incomplete, damaged, and therefore hard to decipher, seems to speak in one place of an endowment of land to provide an income

for an alms house. No. 309, which is very brief, also mentions the establishment of a new alms house.

The unit of currency mentioned in epigraphs pertaining to King Vallalan is always the *pon*. The Madras University Tamil Lexicon, which was compiled around the end of the First World War, estimated that its value was Rs. 1.25. If this seems absurdly low for a gold coin, it should be remembered that this amount was about a week's wages for unskilled workers in those days. Personally, I cannot imagine a gold coin having such a low value, but lacking any other evidence for its worth, I will defer to the august and scholarly compilers of what is still the most comprehensive and authoritative Tamil dictionary.

461

The King replied, 'In order that my good name should flourish [in the form of subsequent generations], hoist a beautiful banner on high and spread the following news by striking a *murasu* drum: "Whosoever enters this splendid city where the handsome Lord Arunai lives, whatsoever they ask, I shall give them".'

462

Then the ministers said, 'O our king, whose good name flourishes throughout the world, listen! Are we capable of giving away whatever the devotees who worship the feet of the Lord, praised by the *sastras*, and elders and hymn-singing bards take it into their heads to ask?'

463

The king said, 'Will anyone ask for something that is not [available] in the world? Even if anyone did, no one could give such a thing. So, quickly do what I have ordered.' The ministers then hoisted the flag on high and struck the *murasu*.

464

On hearing that the king of Arunai, where the Lord dwells, had hoisted a flag, people from all over the world drew near in great numbers to receive gifts that alleviated their poverty. There were old people, people carrying a *kavadi* [a pole with a weight on each end], *tapasvins*, brahmins chanting the Vedas, wandering minstrels, singers and beggars.

465

To those who came and wanted to perform a marriage ceremony, the king gave 1,000 *pon*. In addition he made those who said that they were unable to redeem their pledges of houses, lands and jewels happy by giving them 2,000 *pon*. Afterwards, he gave 300 *pon* to old brahmins who wanted to perform the *upanayanam* [sacred thread] ceremony.

Next : Lord Arunachaleswara, noting that the feeling 'I have built this great gopuram', was strongly rooted inside him, decided to teach him a lesson.

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(1) An epigraph in Karnataka puts the date at 1310, but this seems unlikely. At that time Kannanur was still the southern capital. Also, King Vallalan may not have taken control of Tiruvannamalai, following the land grant, until around 1312.

(2) A few years ago North Arcot District, in which Tiruvannamalai was located,

was bifurcated. The southern half, with Tiruvannamalai as its headquarters, was named Tiruvannmalai-Sambuvarayar after these rulers.

(3) Numbers refer to the definitive edition published by Institut Français de Pondichéry: *Tiruvannamalai, a Saiva Sacred Complex in South India*, volume one, part one, 'Inscriptions'. Ed. P.R. Srinivasan, published in 1990. I refer to it in future as *Tiruvannamalai*.

(4) *Deva* is a traditional honorific suffix given to many rulers and great men.

(5) King Vallalan's father, Narasimha III, may have started building works at Tiruvannamalai, viewing it as a potential capital (although there is no evidence of this) but the town was never designated as a capital until after his death.

(6) *Tiruvannamalai*, pp. 389-90.

There is no inscription that authenticates this proclamation but there are several that show that he was a major patron of all the services that the temple provided. Inscription 301, dated 1317, gives elaborate details of the activities he was supporting:

It is February 15th, 1317(7) This gift was given in favour of the God Annamalai Natha Deva and Unnamulai Nacci to provide for their personal decorations and for use in their shrines thrice every day, for the lamp festival on five full-moon days and for the great twelve-day festival in the month of Jyeshtha. This gift was to last till the sun, the moon and the stars endure.

(8)

On the 22nd day of the month of Masi [1317] he [King Vallalan] donated 10,000 pon to Annamalai Nayanar of Arunagiri and Unnamulai Nacciyar to provide for their food offering, for their personal adornment, for the lamp festival on five full-moon days and for various other services.

Of this 10,000 pon to provide for the food offering and the adornment three times daily to Annamalai Nayanar and Unnamulai Nacciyar, to provide daily for the food offering and adornment during the services instituted in the name of Vira Vallaladeva and to provide for lamp wicks in the night 366 days a year.(9)

Here are some of the other activities which inscription 301 says the king supported:

1) 400 pon for two annual processions of the deities through town.

2) 474 pon for food for various temple servants.

3) 647 pon for temple utensils.

Inscription 302 gives details of other activities that the king supported in the temple. They include: reciters of the *Vedas*; suppliers of water; servers of areca nut; those who made paste for the body; incense burners; umbrella makers; works on a *mantapam*; washermen and barbers; bringers of water; feeding rice to brahmins; providing milk; endowments for festivals, etc.

King Vallalan was determined that his endowments would last for ever. At the end of epigraph 301 he appended the following ominous curse:

the worship and the construction work should continue to be performed without diminution as long as the moon and the sun endure. One who destroyed this gift or disturbed it would incur the sin of one who had killed a brahmin on the banks of the Ganga and would be considered to be the husband of his own mother. (10)

All in all, the epigraph records donations of 33,000 *pon* made by the king to the temple. This is the largest amount donated by any single person up till that time. The money was all collected from villages in the surrounding region, a list of which is given in the epigraph. Since the amount was collected locally, it demonstrates indirectly that King Vallalan was based in a region that had a prosperous economy, and that he was running the country in a

reasonably competent manner.

What, though, is one to make of this astonishing generosity when money was always needed for military campaigns? Two plausible explanations present themselves:

1. He was fulfilling his duties as a Hindu monarch by liberally supporting and endowing a famous temple in his capital city.
2. He wanted something very badly from God and was prepared to pay a small fortune to get it. It should be remembered that few *pujas* are done out of an unconditional love of God. Mostly, the performers or donors want grace, *punya*, blessings or material benefits.

Apart from his endowments there is not much evidence among the scanty biographical facts that are available that he was a pious or spiritually minded man. He was, of course, a militant upholder of Hindu nationalism and fought fiercely against all Muslim attempts to gain hegemony over the South. These activities, though, needed no *pujas*; he was quite able to achieve them through his own efforts. One tends to go to God for the things one cannot achieve by oneself, not the things one can. The one thing that King Vallalan wanted but couldn't produce himself was a worthy successor.

The *Arunachala Puranam* is undoubtedly a hagiographical account, written two centuries after the event, in which facts are happily mixed with exaggerations and fictitious events, but there may be a kernel of truth in its basic thesis: that the king wanted a competent successor and was willing to empty his treasury in the hope that God would provide him with one.

More evidence of his patronage of the temple can be found in the next verse and in the epigraphs that support it:

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[Someone asked:] 'The jewelled *mantapam* and the compound wall in the temple are deteriorating. O Lord, give us funds to repair them.' The king gave 2,000 *pon* with great devotion and said, 'Renovate them properly'. In addition, 50,000 *pon* were given to endow *maths* throughout the land.

One surprising omission from the epigraphs is any detailed reference to the major building works that King Vallalan is believed to have undertaken in the temple. The *gopuram* on the east side of the fourth *prakara* is named after him, and it is generally accepted that he was responsible for its construction. This is a curious omission for a man who liked to boast about his achievements, right down to such minor expenditures as six *pon* to some officials who performed services in one of the *mantapams*.

Only relatively minor sums are allotted to building works in the nine epigraphs that date from his reign. Inscription 301, for example, has a grant of 400 *pon* for 'a variety of construction work', while later the same inscription notes a gift of 800 *pon* for 'the worship in the temple and for construction works including the wall'. This may be the wall, mentioned in verse 466, that needed to be repaired. It is certainly too small a sum to build the major wall that abuts the Vallalan Gopuram.

The only clear reference to work on a *gopuram* comes at the end of epigraph 302, dated 1341. There it is stated: 'for the temple works including the building of the *gopuram* and the enclosure wall built by Tiruppal.' This is a damaged inscription in which the text before and after this statement is missing. There is no mention of the sum involved - if it was a large amount it would indicate that a major work was in progress - nor is it mentioned which *gopuram* or which wall. As support for the contention that King Vallalan built the *gopuram* that now bears his name and the wall on either side of it, the epigraphic evidence cannot be regarded as conclusive.(11)

Both the *Arunachala Puranam* account and the temple epigraphs from King Vallalan's reign regularly and repeatedly boast of his greatness and his accomplishments. The fact that neither of them specifically mentions his role in constructing what would then have been one of the biggest and most visible parts of the temple complex is strong circumstantial evidence that his contemporaries did not associate him with its construction.

Be that as it may, popular belief and custom now firmly identify the *gopuram* with King Vallalan. There is even a local tradition about the trials the king underwent after its construction.

King Vallalan, after building his *gopuram*, felt great pride in his achievement. Lord Arunachaleswara, noting that the feeling 'I have built this great *gopuram*', was strongly rooted inside him, decided to teach him a lesson. There is a ten-day festival in which Arunachaleswara is paraded each day through these streets of Tiruvannamalai. In the first festival after the *gopuram* had been built, Arunachaleswara initially refused to leave the temple via the passage in the centre of the new *gopuram*. For the first nine days of the festival, He always left the temple via a different route. On the tenth and last day the king realised his mistake and became more humble. He broke down and cried before the Lord, begging him to use the *gopuram* for just one day. Lord Arunachaleswara saw that the king's pride had abated and granted his request. This particular festival is still celebrated in Tiruvannamalai. To commemorate King Vallalan's attack of pride and his subsequent humility, Arunachaleswarar is only taken through the king's *gopuram* on the tenth and final day.(12)

Apart from the Vallala Gopuram and the wall adjoining it, there are other items in the temple that are clearly a result of his patronage. There are several statues of him, one of which is still garlanded every day. One shows him with a full beard, another shows him with one of this queens, and a third as an old man. He was also responsible for the Nandi, and its covering *mantapam*, which lies to the east of the Kili Gopuram. On the right-hand pillar there is a carving of King Vallalan and on the left-hand pillar there is a carving of the *ganda-berunda*, the imperial emblem of the Hoysalas.

And now back to the *Arunachala Puranam*.

467

[The sage] Narada, hearing that King Vallalan, as he proclaimed, was graciously bestowing gifts daily to blind people, to devotees of Siva, to the lame, to wandering minstrels, to those afflicted by the disease of poverty and [many] others, approached that king.

468

When he heard about the arrival of the *muni*, the great

tapasvin, the king with great love descended quickly from his throne and, surrounded by all his ministers, approached the holy man, singing his praises, received him, and offered him a seat free from all impurities. Once the *muni* was seated, the king began to speak.

469

'O great *muni*, you who were born from the *tapas* of Brahma and who sing with the *vina* in your beautiful hands, graciously enlighten me about the purpose of your visit to this lowly cur.' Then the ascetic replied:

470

'O king belonging to the lineage of Agni, which is one of the three ancestral lines [Surya, Chandra and Agni] praised by the world-renowned *tapasvins* and the praise-worthy ascetics who have conquered the five senses, I have heard of your flawless munificence and have come to learn about [it]. Tell me what is on your mind.'

471

'O *muni*, O great *tapasvin* whom the *rishis* learned in the *Vedas* and *sastras* praise, please listen! I have no son to speak my name [at the time of my death] or to rule my great kingdom [after me]. I have therefore hoisted a flag so that I can lovingly give whatever in this world is humbly solicited by devotees of the Lord who shares half His body with the one whose hair is decorated by dewy flowers. But I know not the will of God.'

472

Then Narada replied, 'The worthy *Dharma Sastras* proclaim that those who perform great charitable acts on this earth will obtain children. Furthermore, qualified people have also said so. So, by the grace of the Guru who protects everyone and who delights in wearing the crescent moon and the surging Ganga in his matted locks, a son will be born. Now, O king, grant me leave.'

473

Full of love, the *muni* went to see Lord Siva's abode in Kailash to tell him of the king's justice. As the *Siva ganas* [attendants or followers] were standing there, singing His praises, Narada prostrated himself to the dazzling form of Nandikeshwara, who was standing in the foreground. Then, beholding the beautiful scene of Siva with the crescent moon in His hair, surrounded by *rishis*, he praised the Lord and said:

474

'O Lord of Lords, dwelling in luminous Kailash, praised be Your holy feet! Desiring a son to speak his name, a king called Vallalan in the flourishing, flawless city of Arunai, has hoisted a flag to proclaim that if anyone in the world asks for whatever he wants, he [the king] will gladly give it. Listen now to the glory of this king.'

475

'He enables justice to flourish and is the guardian of the truth. He never swerves from righteousness. This great king was born into the world as the embodiment of the *dharma* that weeds out sin. He regards all beings on the earth as his own and treats them accordingly. He is Your

devoted slave. Every day he prays in the following way:

"O First Cause, Your lotus feet are my refuge!"

Narada's praises are but a dim echo of the adulatory epithets and grandiose titles that King Vallalan bestowed on himself. Two epigraphs in the temple list a few of his titles. Some of the political ones can be used to corroborate events in his life.

1. 'Destroyer of the Makara Kingdom.' Makara is probably the same as Magada, the territory that contained Tiruvannamalai, but there is no indication of how, where or when he destroyed it. Though it was given to him by the Pandya king, he might have pre-empted the issue by forcibly occupying it first. This forcible occupation may have been the destruction of the kingdom that he referred to.
2. 'Uplifter of the Pandya family.'
3. 'Preceptor in establishing the Chola kingdom.'
4. 'Preceptor in establishing the Pandya kingdom.'

Dated 1317, titles two, three and four indicate that he was a major player, possibly the major on the Tamil political stage at that time. Other kings, nominally independent, clearly depended on him for support and for ensuring a smooth transition of power. Many of the Chola territories in what is now Andhra Pradesh were taken over by the Hoysala empire, while the Pandya kingdom of this period only held onto a small amount of territory in southern Tamil Nadu.

Epigraph 303 praises him as:

- 5 'Tormentor of the Katava king.'
- 6 'Emperor of Komkana.'
- 7 'Vanquisher of Chola, Malava, Gauda and Gujjara countries.' Since this epigraph dates from 1341, it can be assumed, if he is telling the truth, that the new names that appear here are all kings and territories conquered or annexed between 1317 and 1341. The same inscription gives him a string of more general titles:
- 8 'Great King of Kings.'
- 9 'The Supreme Lord of Kings.'
- 10 'The Unequalled Lord.'
- 11 'The Crest Jewel of the Omniscient.'
- 12 'The Vanquisher of Opponents.'
- 13 'Warrior Not Requiring Any Support.'
- 14 'Lion to the Elephant-like Opponents.'
- 15 'Cupid Possessing Unusually Beautiful Form.'
- 16 'The Emperor Possessing Undoubted Power.'

Next: Siva's promise to 'perform the vedic ritual' 'at the time of your death' is still remembered and commemorated every year in Tiruvannamalai.

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(7) All dates have been converted from the equivalent days in the Tamil calendar.

(8) *Tiruvannamalai*, pp. 390-91.

(9) *Ibid.* p. 90.

(10) *Ibid.* p. 392.

(11) Only one of the 500 inscriptions in the temple (334, dated 1377) associates the *gopuram* with King Vallalan's name, calling it 'Vallalan's Gateway'. None of them mentions who was responsible for its construction. However, since this was the only major *gopuram* to be built around this time, it is likely that this is the structure referred to in 301 and 302.

(12) I have occasionally wondered how an inanimate image of a deity could compel the bearers of its palanquin, all of whom were in the pay of the king, to use a side exit instead of the one decreed by the king. The king could not have been too happy to see his employees march out day after day via a different exit when he had just spent a fortune on the *gopuram*.

My favourite, though, also from 303, is '*sanivarasiddhi*' which means, 'one who accomplishes great deeds on Saturdays'. No mention is made of what feats made his weekends so memorable, nor is it explained why his weekdays were so lacking in achievements.

476

Listening to the discourse of the *muni* who had come before Him, Lord Siva thought, 'I will ascertain for Myself what this Vallalan is like'. Then the Peerless One said to the *devas*, *rishis* and *munis*, 'All of you go to your respective ashrams'.

477

Immediately the Lord of Kailash summoned the king of Alakapuri [Alakesan, the god of wealth]. That king, who came with such a huge pile of gold that he was honoured by everyone, prostrated himself before the gracious feet of the Lord, whose body wears the *rudraksha* and the cobra as His ornaments, and praised Him. Then the Red-hued One graciously spoke a few words:

478

'O king who rules Alakapuri, listen. I have decided to test the steadfastness of the king who dwells in Arunai. Therefore become My worthy disciple and accompany Me joyfully with lots of wealth.' Thus said the Lord of Kailash.

479

Then Paramasiva, who shines with the indescribable Lady as one of His halves, took the form of a *sangama* [Saiva monk] that could now be worshipped by everyone. As Brahma and Vishnu looked on, they felt a joy they had never experienced before. All the *devas* showered forth a rain of flowers while the *Vedas* praised [Him].

480

All the beautiful Siva *ganas* dwelling in Kailash, the abode of the Lord became *andis* [mendicants] by the grace of our most excellent Lord Siva. Coming in a large group, they reached the beautiful city where Vallalan dwells and were praised by those who knew the ways of the king.

481

The mendicants proclaimed: 'Are there no highly virtuous mothers who regard their husbands as gods? Are there no young men excelling in beauty? Is there no one to give food to the hungry? Are there no just monarchs? Are there no good-hearted ladies who will lovingly invite us and attentively serve as food?'

482

'Even if gold is given, we don't want [it]. If you give us beautiful ornaments, we don't want [them]. We desire neither shining rubies nor long pearl necklaces. If you grant us sovereignty over kingdoms, our minds are not in

that. However, should you offer us food and protection,
we shall eat with great delight.'

483

The Lord, who had given up the deer He was holding to take on the appearance of a *sangama*, headed for the street in that excellent city wherein dwelled the *devadasis*, whose lips were like red fruit. His lily-like mouth blossomed, and He cried out like a beggar suffering terrible hunger.

Young girls became *devadasis* by being consecrated to the service of a temple deity. Although they were taught singing and dancing and were obliged to perform before devotees, they were often little more than prostitutes whose earnings went toward the support of the temple or its priests. The British, during their occupation of India, tried to put an end to the practice, but were not totally successful. The tradition still lingers on in some areas such as northern Karnataka.

Marco Polo, the famous traveller and chronicler of China, visited the coastal regions of Tamil Nadu in 1292-3, the early years of King Vallalan's reign, and noted that there were 'certain abbeys [temples] in which are gods and goddesses to whom many young girls are consecrated'.

Marco Polo's accounts give an interesting insight into the cultural and economic activities of the time. He confirmed that the region was prosperous, having a large trade in jewels, mostly pearls and horses. Indeed, he corroborated other contemporary accounts that said that the kings of South India wasted a large amount of their income on importing horses every year from Arabia because they didn't know how to look after them or breed them properly. (13) The 20,000 horses that Malik Khafur looted from the South in 1311 would have made a major dent in the treasuries of the southern kingdoms. Though the wars and lifestyles of King Vallalan's generation may seem to be far removed from today's world, at the domestic level there has been a cultural continuity. Marco Polo's account, the first eye-witness account of Tamil culture by a European, showed that ordinary people there were living in much the same way that they do today:

And let me tell you that the people of this country have a custom of rubbing their houses all over with cowdung. Moreover, all of them, great and small, kings and barons included, do sit upon the ground only It is their practice that everyone, male and female, do wash the body twice every day (14) So also they drink only from drinking vessels, and every man has his own; nor will anyone drink from another vessel. And when they drink, they do not put the vessel to the lips but hold it aloft and let the drink spout into the mouth.

484

'O Ladies,' He said. 'You who have eyes like a fish, whose speech is like a parrot and whose faces are like the moon; you who wear garlands of light flowers in your hair and have breasts like young coconuts rubbed with sandalwood fragrance! How much gold is needed to stay with you till dawn so that the suffering caused by Kama [the god of love or lust] with his five arrows is removed?'

485

The *devadasis* replied, 'O Lord whose beauty defies description! You who resemble Paramasiva wearing the cobra with lifted head! Listen! We neither lie nor cheat. You must give 1,000 *pon* for one lady to make love all night. If you give this we will join our bodies with yours and remove the suffering caused by Kama.'

486

Siva immediately handed out the gold that the *devadasis* had demanded. Matching up one mendicant with each lady, he signalled to them with His eyes that they must stay together all night. Thus, in the city of Arunai, which grants many boons, Siva made the *devadasi* streets light up with the great assemblies of *sangamas* embracing all the *devadasis*.

487

Siva made sure that no *devadasi* was left unengaged and had everyone embrace according to the path of the lustful Kama. Then he set off for the king's palace with His disciple [Alakesan, the god of wealth], who had experimented with [and followed] the path that leads to goodness. Seeing them come towards the palace, the king, who was an expert archer and the ruler of the land, approached the two *sangamas* deferentially, praised them, invited them inside and seated them there. Then the king began to speak:

488

'Lord, Your golden feet have deigned to come here. Is it [because of] the *tapas* I have performed? What is the good deed I am performing in the world? If, due to my past merit, I am able to give whatever You ask, I will be honoured and I will receive Your gracious glance.'

489

Siva said: 'O King, listen. May your kindness and your just path flourish for ever! I have come to you for a purpose that I will now tell. If you give me a woman to remove the misery caused today by the five arrows sent by the formless Kama, your fame will shine over the seven seas.'

490

The king replied: 'I shall do more! For You, Lord, a beautiful marriage will be arranged.' Hearing this, the Venerable One replied: 'O king, listen. Marriage is a great bother. Only the *devadasis* have the skill and knowledge, which is a great treasure, to alleviate the suffering caused by the disease of lust.'

491

'O *sangama* who teaches wisdom even to those who have made their minds steady, I shall act according to Your wish.' Then the king called his guards and said, 'Go immediately and fetch a beautiful *devadasi*'. The guards set off faster than the wind.

492

They reached the street where the *devadasis* lived and entered every house. Each time they looked inside the crowded houses they saw a *devadasi* dancing and singing

affectionately with a Siva devotee wearing kondrai flowers. 'Today it won't be possible to find an available *devadasi*,' they thought, and returned to the palace to tell the king.

493

The king listened to what his guards told him and became angry. Looking at his ministers he said, 'Is it the doing of the Lord that my words should fail? Is there any defect in our *pujas*? Is it proper to tell that *sangama* who spoke so clearly that we can't get him a lady because there are none available?'

494

The ministers said: 'O prosperous one! Stop worrying. We, your humble servants, will bring back a beautiful *devadasi*. Give up your anxiety.' Arriving at the street of the *devadasis*, they saw the amorous play inside the houses and they addressed the *devadasis* who had perfumed their rounded breasts:

495

'On this street where there are crowds of lotus-eye ladies living closely together, if there is one lady who can satiate the lust of the wise man who has approached our king, she will have bracelets, ornaments made of rubies and tinkling anklets; she will always eat food with six flavours along with ghee, curds and milk.'

496

After hearing what the ministers had said, the ladies humbly replied, 'We have already been paid by these devotees to stay with them all night. After this night is over, we will do what you say.' The ministers were much disturbed and reported what the *devadasis* had said to the king.

497

The king said, 'Why is this insignificant thing becoming so difficult for us?' He grew sad and his mind was filled with anxious thoughts. 'Is this the working of the Lord's grace? I will fulfil my promise to the *sangama* who has appeared before us as if He was Siva Himself.' So saying, the king took his bow and quickly went to the street of the *devadasis*.

498

He spoke to them in the following manner: 'A flag has been hoisted on high so that those who come here will know that whatever they ask for will be given. I will give this kingdom to the *devadasi* who will help me avoid breaking my word to the beautiful *sangama* who has come today.'

499

'I will give her elephants, horses and as much gold as she wants. She will have a palanquin inlaid with pearls. If she satisfies the desire of the Venerable One, I shall give her the great sceptre of authority to govern this ancient land. I shall serve her and she shall become my own mother.'

500

'All the *rishis* who are knowledgeable in the *Vedas* say that among all worldly pleasures, this is the highest.

Therefore, come ladies. If you can remove the desire of the *sangama* who has come to our land, and in return you ask for my life, I shall give it.'

501

The ladies humbly replied, 'Abiding by your laws, O Lord, we have already accepted the gold to have pleasure with these pure devotees. What else can we do?' The king of this land became ashamed and went back to his famous palace.

502

When he got home two of his wives, Nallamadevi and the young generous Sallamadevi perceived the change in his moon-like face. Prostrating at his feet, they said, 'O Lord who can rule [the whole of] this ancient world! What is the reason for your sadness? Please tell us.' Then Vallalan, who walks the path of purity, replied to them:

503

'Today a venerable man approached this prosperous king desiring pleasure with a woman having deer-like eyes. In accordance with his request, I tried to get a *devadasi* but none is available in our city. Because of this I am distressed.' After listening to the king, the younger wife began to speak.

504

'O king who has made a promise to the devotee suffering from lust, we don't know what is on your mind. If you think that I, the younger wife, should offer myself to him, then I shall do so.' The king, who was blessed by Lakshmi, rejoiced in his mind. He looked at his wife and said, 'O noble lady, you will go with the devotee into a room and remove the suffering inflicted on him by the formless Kama.' Then the good king informed the venerable man.

A queen of King Vallalan is mentioned in an epigraph dated 1335, but her name is not legible. He may have had two queens, but if he did, there is no record of the second one.

In the Vallalan Gopuram, over the western entrance, there is an image of King Vallalan with a queen by his side. In the sixteen-pillared *mantapam* outside the temple, the second pillar on the south side has carved on it the *ganda-berunda*, the imperial emblem of the Hoysalas. Facing north there is a statue of King Vallalan's queen, standing on a projecting platform, supported by lion's heads. She appears to be past middle age and stands with her hands folded in supplication to a statue of Siva and Parvati, seated on a Nandi.

505

Sallamadevi immediately bathed in perfumed water, dressed up beautifully and went inside the room. There she skillfully played the *vina* and sang melodiously. But when she came close to the Supreme One and looked at Him, she saw that the One who wore the *rudraksha* beads was deep in meditation.

506

Then, thinking that she would make the Venerable One happy, she took perfumed water and sprinkled it over His dazzling form, speaking to Him in a pleasant manner.

When He didn't even open His eyes to look at her, she hesitated a moment and then began to speak.

507

'O Lord, alas, is it proper that the king's promise should be uttered in vain?' Then the beautiful lady placidly bent over and embraced Him. At that very moment Paramasiva turned into a baby and, to make her happy, began to cry.

508

When Siva became a child and was crying loudly, the king, thinking that this was the Lord's doing, came quickly, took the child in his arms, embraced it and lovingly kissed it on the forehead. But just as the king was so immersed in bliss, that Immaculate One disappeared.

509

'O Lord, will we ignorant ones know the working of Your divine will? O embodiment of Truth! You who have three eyes! You who are the *Vedas* and the Lord of the *Vedas*! Pure One! Is it to test us that You have appeared in the form of a child and then disappeared? What is our destiny now, O Great One?' The king, along with the queen, lamented in this way.

510

Then the king's heart weakened. As he was crying out loudly, Iswara, who is praised by the excellent *tapasvins*, appeared mounted on the bull with Parvati, all surrounded by Siva *ganas*. Brahma and Vishnu followed them. In this way the Lord gave his *darshan* to the prosperous king dwelling in Aruna. The king prostrated and prayed with fervour:

511

'O Origin of Everything, I surrender! O luminous One who can protect devotees on earth, I surrender! O Lord wearing the crescent moon and the Ganga in Your pure, lustrous red matted hair, I surrender! O Immaculate One, bless me with a son to carry my sceptre and rule with justice.'

512

'O handsome king, listen! I myself became your son. Hence, at the time of your death, I will perform the vedic ritual for you.' So saying, the One bearing the crescent moon blessed the king and returned to Kailash. Thereafter King Vallalan ruled the land with great virtue.

Siva's promise to 'perform the vedic ritual' 'at the time of your death' is still remembered and commemorated every year in Tiruvannamalai. In the month of Masi the temple priests read out the news of King Vallalan's death to Arunachaleswara. His image is then carried in a procession to the village of Pallikonda Pattu, about three kilometres from Tiruvannamalai, for the performance of the king's annual *sraddha* rites. The connection between this village and the life and death of King Vallalan is no longer known. It is unlikely that he lived there since his palace is thought to have been located about a mile to the east of the main temple. Until about a hundred years ago the last remains of what was reputed to be his

palace could still be seen there, but around the turn of the century the land was levelled and cultivated and the railway line from Villupuram to Tirupati now runs across the site.

King Vallalan continued to rule until 1342. His final military campaigns were waged against the rulers and generals of Madurai. The Delhi Sultanate had overcome the Pandya dynasty there and had installed its own ruler. In 1330 the ruler of Madurai declared independence from Delhi and gave himself the title Sultan Jalal-ud-din Hasan Shah. Ten years later he was murdered by his chief minister, Udaui, who then took office as the next Sultan. Shortly afterwards he decided that the time was ripe to launch an attack against the Hoysala territories to the north. He marched his army to Tiruvannamalai where King Vallalan was waiting for him. In the ensuing battle the Madurai troops were gaining the upper hand when a stray arrow struck Udaui and killed him. This effectively ended the battle, for the Muslim troops retreated leaderless back to Madurai.

Taking advantage of the ensuing disorder in the Madurai kingdom, King Vallalan decided to attack the fortress town of Kannanur, the former southern capital of the Hoysala kingdom. The family had not controlled it for many years, but with the Sultanate of Madurai looking to expand its territory, King Vallalan anticipated that it would be a useful bulwark against the expansionist ambition of the Madurai Sultan. In 1340-41 he besieged the fort for six months. At the end of that time the defenders asked for a cease-fire so that they could consult the Sultan of Madurai about the terms of the surrender. The new Sultan, Ghiyas-ud-din, ignored the cease-fire, marched a hastily assembled army of 4,000 to Kannanur and made a secret night attack on King Vallalan's sleeping army, which was completely taken by surprise. King Vallalan's besieging army was routed and the king himself was captured and taken as a prisoner to Madurai.

At first he was treated very well, but after Ghiyas-ud-din had persuaded him to part, not for the first time in his life, with all his riches, horses and elephants, he had him killed and flayed. Ibn Batua, an Arab traveller who happened to be in Madurai at the time, witnessed the aftermath of the execution: 'His skin was stuffed with straw and hung upon on the wall of Madurai where I saw it in the same position.' Thus ended, ingloriously, the illustrious reign of King Vallalan III. As he predicted, his utterly useless son lost his empire within a few years and the Hoysala dynasty came to an end.

Though he had no worthy heir 'to carry my sceptre and rule with justice' (v. 511), there was one man in his court who had all the characteristics and traits that he desired for his own son. That man was Harihara, one of his generals, and it was he who later became the first ruler of the Vijayanagar empire, the same empire that rapidly swallowed the crumbling, leaderless remains of the Hoysala kingdoms. Knowing what an able general and administrator he was, King Vallalan gave him increasingly wide authority over the affairs of his realm in the last few years of his reign. I think he eventually came to regard him as 'the son he never had', an attitude that the *Arunachala Puranam* indirectly endorses.

When Siva first appears in Tiruvannamalai, it is in the guise of a *sangama*, a term which primarily denotes a monk of the Virasaiva school. This branch of Saivism started in Karnataka around the

twelfth century and later spread south, although its stronghold was and still is Karnataka. Because it is a strange term in a text such as this, I think it has a symbolic significance. Harihara came from a Karnataka family whose surname was Sangama. I suspect that Ellapa Nayinar, the author of the *Arunachala Puranam*, used this fact to weave an allegorical fable.

At a time when King Vallalan was probably pleading with God to give him a worthy successor, Harihara Sangama appeared on the scene and effectively took on the role. In the final verse of the *Arunachala Puranam* account (512) the '*Sangama*' announced: 'O handsome King, listen! I myself became your son.' Though he was not the king's biological son, he became a son-in-law by marrying one of Vallalan's daughters.

Harihara and his successors were fanatic militant Hindus who conquered and united most of South India, forced the Muslim invaders to retreat back to the north, and set up a stable dynasty that ruled for seven generations. King Vallalan would have been proud of them.

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(13) In the ninth century, the saint Manikkavachakar was given a small fortune by the King of Madurai to buy horses from the coastal port of Perunturai. On the way there, Siva appeared before him, and Manikkavachakar gave all the money to him instead.

(14) Europeans of this era rarely bathed at all. They would have been most surprised by the Indian ideas of cleanliness.

Isanya Desikar

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Isanya Desikar, whose *math* is located just outside Tiruvannamalai on the old *pradakshina* road, was a distinguished yogi who, like many before and after him, have felt the spiritual call of Arunachala. He came and settled at the foot of the mountain quite late in his life, but nevertheless, by virtue of his intense and personal relationship with Arunachaleswara, he can still be regarded as one of the major saints of Arunachala.

He was born in 1750 in a small village called Rayavelur, which is located near the River Palar in northern Tamil Nadu. His parents, Tiruneelakantha Desikar and Uma Parvathi, belonged to the local farming community. Prior to Isanya Desikar's birth his parents had been unable to produce a son for many years. To solve this problem they had prayed to Lord Murugan at Arunachala and had asked him to bless them with a son. When their prayers were answered, the child was given the name of Kandappan, one of the many names of Lord Murugan.

It soon became clear that he was a precocious child both spiritually and intellectually. When he was first sent to school, he astounded his teachers by reciting the lessons before they had even been taught. Then, while the other boys struggled to catch up, he would sit quietly in meditation. His father gave him Siva *diksha* at the age of seven and then bestowed the title of 'Desikar' on him. The title, which may have been a hereditary one, entitled and empowered the son to carry out the duties and functions of a guru.

Isanya Desikar (a name he acquired much later in life) spent most of his childhood uneventfully, mostly sitting in meditation in his family house. When he reached the age of sixteen, his father decided it was time for him to get married. While Tiruneelakantha was looking for a bride from amongst his own relatives, Isanya Desikar, who had no inclination to get married, appealed to his mother.

'I don't want to become a *samsari*. We have been the slaves of Lord Siva since the days of our distant ancestors. My mind longs to see all the holy places associated with Him. Instead of marrying me off, give me permission to go on a pilgrimage.'

His mother granted his request and soon afterwards he set off on an extensive South India *yatra*. It seems he never went home again.

A major turning point in his life occurred at Chidambaram. After he had visited the temple there and had *darshan* of Lord Nataraja, he went to visit Sri Mouna Swami, a local saint who was reputed to be a *siddha purusha*. Mouna Swami lived on the northern bank of the Ayi tank in Chidambaram and appeared to be immersed in *samadhi* for most of the time. Isanya Desikar felt an immediate attraction to him, so much so that he decided to stay on in Chidambaram in the hope of getting both initiation into *sannyasa* and *upadesa* (teachings) from him. For some time Isanya Desikar begged for his food and had *darshan* of Mouna Swami twice a day, but the Swami himself appeared to pay little attention to him. Feeling that the Swami was ignoring him because he was not yet a mature enough devotee, Isanya Desikar decided that he would try to compensate for this lack by giving Mouna Swami a display of his

earnestness. He took off all his clothes except for his loincloth and went and stood before Mouna Swami during one of the heavy winter rains. When Mouna Swami saw him standing there, undaunted by the heavy rain and without the least trace of a shiver on his bare body, he took the blanket that was covering his own body and wrapped it around the shoulders of Isanya Desikar. Then, to Isanya Desikar's delight, he gave him the desired initiation and *upadesa* and afterwards put him into a state of deep meditation. To celebrate his acceptance, Isanya Desikar composed a five-verse poem in praise of Mouna Swami. In the first verse he extolled the greatness of his new teacher:

Ever-perfect one! You have manifested in the world as the one who is steeped in the pure bliss of the experience of the expansive infinity that has no attributes. [You have manifested] as the Self-realised silence and as the embodiment of truth and grace to bring harmony among various beliefs. I, keeping my head at the feet of your devotees, regard you as the Lord himself who dances in space at Chidambaram and who is worshipped by the three worlds

In the fifth and final verse, Isanya Desikar acknowledges that he cannot attain liberation through his own efforts or through his religious knowledge. He therefore requests Mouna Swami to bestow his grace on him and grant him absorption in the Self:

O Guru possessing Supreme Knowledge, known as the silent Guru living on the banks of the Ayi tank, what is the use of studying the scriptures and the many different arts? Of what avail is an extensive study of Vedanta and *Siddhanta*, expounding their meaning, or following the ways of various religions? It is easy to transcend *samsara*? Bless me with a supremely blissful absorption in the Self, in which one can see the emergence of your effulgent grace.

It is not recorded how long Isanya Desikar spent with Mouna Swami. It may well have been several years because, when he finally decided to leave Chidambaram to carry on with his pilgrimage, he had the long matted hair of an ascetic yogi and the reputation for being a *siddha*, a yogi with great powers. His biographer⁽¹⁾ reports that he travelled stark naked and carried only a few insignia which marked him out as being a member of the South Indian order of *siddha sannyasins*.

After leaving Chidambaram he wandered around for some time and met at least two famous saints: a fellow *siddha*, Dakshinamurti Swami, who lived at Tiruvarur and a man called Ugandalinga Jnana Desikar, a Guru and a *Brahmanishta* who lived in a village called Sikkal near Nagappattinam. When his wanderlust had abated, he decided to settle down and undergo a long period of solitary meditation. He soon found a suitable place - a large uninhabited cave on a small hill. The nearest town was Vettavalam, which is only a few miles from Tiruvannamalai, and the nearest village, a settlement called Pakkam, supplied him with his few bodily needs. He spent many years in this cave, apparently trying to immerse himself in the state of *nirvikalpa samadhi*

During his stay there he was partially supported by a local farmer, Muthuswami Udaiyar. This man visited the cave every day to offer milk from his cow. After several years of devoted service

Muthuswami Udaiyar's labours were indirectly rewarded when he found a hoard of treasure while he was digging the foundations of a house he was planning to build for himself. His neighbours refused to believe that he had come across the treasure accidentally. Instead, they decided that Isanya Desikar had used his powers to manufacture gold coins so that he could pay Muthuswami Udaiyar for his milk. The villagers who believed in this version of events went en masse to Isanya Desikar's cave and, after singing his praises in many ways, requested that he produce some gold coins for them as well. Isanya Desikar realised that he would no longer be able to meditate peacefully in an area where he had a reputation for manufacturing gold. So, when the importuning crowds had dispersed, he quietly slipped away and walked continuously until he reached Arunachala. He found a quiet place on the banks of the Goraknath tank in the western part of Tiruvannamalai and began to resume his meditation.

It was not long before someone else came forward to support him. A local man, Arunachala Chettiar, had become depressed because he had been unable to produce a son even after many years of marriage. Many people had told him that his luck would change if he could only receive the grace of a holy man. He set out in search of such a person, encountered Isanya Desikar sitting in *samadhi* by the side of the Goraknath tank, and began to serve him with great devotion.

Shortly afterwards, some *siddhas*, who resided at Arunachala but who were invisible to ordinary men, came to Isanya Desikar and escorted him to an uninhabited mountain cave. Inside, there was a large mound of ripe fruits. The thought occurred to him that if one of these fruits was given to Arunachala Chettiar, he would beget a son.

One of the *siddhas* read his mind and responded by saying, 'You may fulfil his desire accordingly'.

The *siddhas* escorted Isanya Desikar back to his place by the tank after first giving him many of the fruits that he had seen in the cave. The fruit that was given to Arunachala Chettiar produced the desired result. Arunachala Chettiar was later given a bag of *vibhuti* by Isanya Desikar. It became a family heirloom and several generations of his family found they could overcome any worldly problems by worshipping it.

Muthuswami Udaiyar, the man who had served Isanya Desikar for many years while he had been mediating near Vettavalam, had become very unhappy when his holy man had suddenly and mysteriously disappeared without giving him any explanation. However, he was not left in this state of dejection for very long. One night, Lord Arunachaleswara himself appeared in one of his dreams in the guise of Isanya Desikar and said, 'Dear son, don't feel sad. I am staying at the north-eastern corner of Arunachala. You can come and see me there.'

Then Arunachaleswara appeared in his own divine form to Isanya Desikar and told him, 'Dear son, I have asked a devotee to come to the north-eastern side of Arunachala to see you. Go there and meet him.'

As Isanya Desikar was walking towards the appointed rendezvous he began to compose some of the verses that were later known as *Svanubhava Stotra Pamalai* (*Garland of Hymns of Self-Experience*). These eventually numbered 117, all of which were

addressed to Lord Arunachala. From the second verse onwards it becomes clear that in discovering Arunachala he had found both his true Guru and his God.

- 2 O Arunachala! Your devotees, recognising you as the infinite reality who is grace embodied in the form of fire, beyond the reach of Brahma and Vishnu, sang in praise of your greatness. I, who have in a miraculous way found you and adopted you as my Guru, may say many things about you, but all I really know is that you are the great and adored Lord Arunagiri. I am unable to say anything more.

In another of his verses he explains that it was Arunachala's power that stilled his mind and enabled him to discern the real nature of the mountain.

- 57 O *Sat-chit-ananda*, who stands as 'The Self is he', by the power of the Guru's love I recognised you as God. I praise and bow to the blissful form, vast as the sky. You made me silent; now grant me liberation.

The poem is a mixture of different metres and the mood of the verses varies from self-deprecation to ecstasy. It may well be that they were composed on many different occasions, for the author sometimes complains about his faults and laments over his spiritual bondage, whereas at other times he exalts in the liberation that the grace of the Lord has granted him. Since it is traditional in Tamil literature for *jnanis* to write verses in which they take a devotee's standpoint and claim to be ignorant, deluded, suffering, etc., one cannot state authoritatively that one verse was written during his *sadhana* and another after his liberation. However, although the chronology of the verses will always remain problematic, there seems to be little doubt that Isanya Desikar eventually attained liberation through the redeeming grace of Arunachala. In one verse, for example, he sings:

- 45 In my identity with the body I had the sense of 'I' and 'mine' in the three states of waking, dream and sleep. By your gracious love this sense has vanished like a dream. You made me turn to you, O Arunachala, you who burn like a flame. You burnt away my Self-forgetfulness.

The poem reveals a familiarity with some of the great works of the Tamil *bhakti* tradition, but the style is distinctively his own. Also, it is interesting to note that the language and philosophy of the verses are uncompromisingly *advaitic*. Many of the great Arunachala saints who have written about the mountain were Saiva in orientation and this is clearly reflected in the language of their poetry. Isanya Desikar was brought up and educated in the Saiva tradition but his verses show that he felt more at home with the language and concepts of Vedanta:

- 81 Is there any truth apart from the Self? Great men live without the illusory mind-screen, rooted in the reality of blissful no-thought. Abiding in the Self, totally free, they are the wise ones, free from karma.

He was enough of a Saiva to revere the mountain as Siva himself and its power of *sakti*, but none of the standard ideas of *Siddhanta* can be found in his verses. When he talks of Siva, he is not conceiving of him in a mythic or even an anthropomorphic form. He instead seems to regard Siva as being simultaneously pure

awareness, the energy that created the manifest world, and the substance out of which the world was created.

87 In the past, present and future, you, the form of grace, abide as the lofty Siva-bliss which is the one life in all life

66 You are the Lord, the Guru, intelligence, the law, our goal. You are absorbed in the Self and you abide as the Self which is everything, with nothing separate from it. In a myriad ways you engage in sport in the world of forms: I as you, you as I. O Supreme Infinite Siva! You shine within the devout as the Self that is awareness.

Scattered throughout the verses there are occasional hints of the path that Isanya Desikar himself followed. Believing that the best and highest form of devotion to Arunachala could be practised by abiding in a thought-free state, he directed his efforts towards cultivating an inner silence.

58 If you think without thoughts of that eternally blissful One who shines everywhere as the divine, as Sakti, as Siva - that *bhakti* itself is *mukti*. Thus proclaim the scriptures

72 Realising that all we have learned is but the work of God, and knowing that we cannot know anything by ourselves, to be in silence is the *jnana* that vouches freedom from rebirth. Speak not. See the unborn Self as *chit*, as Siva. That seeing is illumination.

When we left Isanya Desikar, he was walking toward the north-eastern corner of the mountain to keep his appointment with the devotee who had kept him supplied with milk for so many years. They soon found each other and resumed their former relationship. Isanya Desikar then chose a spot under a banyan tree on the southern side of the Isanya tank and was soon spending most of his time immersed in *samadhi*. Muthuswami Udaiyar often visited him there, and each time he came he would bring food for Isanya Desikar and for any other devotees who happened to be with him.



A 19th century woodcut of Isanya Desikar being guarded by tigers.

When no devotees were near him, Isanya Desikar, who was then about sixty years of age, liked to sit naked, absorbed in *samadhi*. On such occasions Lord Arunachaleswara himself sometimes used to manifest in the form of a tiger to guard him and prevent anyone from disturbing him. Isanya Desikar knew what was happening. Each time he came out of *samadhi*, he would fondly run his fingers through the fur of the tiger and address him lovingly as 'Arunachala, my Lord'. Occasionally other tigers from the forest would come along and help Arunachaleswara with his guard duties. Isanya Desikar knew that the presence of the tigers would intimidate other people, so whenever he saw that devotees were about to visit him, he would send the tigers away by saying, 'My devotees may get frightened if they see you. Please keep away.'

After some time Isanya Desikar moved to a nearby flower garden and took up residence there. Muthuswami Udaiyar, the man who had been feeding him for many years, persuaded the owners of the flower garden to donate a small portion of it so that Isanya Desikar could remain undisturbed there. The owners agreed and handed over about a third of the flower garden. Sri C. Subbiah, who wrote a biography of Isanya Desikar, states that from the day he took up residence in the north-eastern corner of the flower garden he became known to the world as 'Isanya Desikar', for *isanya* in Tamil means 'north-east'. This may well be true but it seems just as likely that he acquired his name either by sitting by the side of the Isanya tank or merely by living for so many years on the north-eastern side of the mountain.

As Isanya Desikar's fame began to spread, he began to attract devotees and disciples. One of them was a man called Pondy Arunachala Swamy who is chiefly remembered for coming to a macabre end after going against his Guru's wishes. He was brought up in Pondicherry, but after he came under the influence of Isanya Desikar he took *sannyasa* and moved to Tiruvannamalai. Since he had no family, his property was lying unclaimed in Pondicherry. It should be remembered that as a *sannyasin* he had no rights to it. Under Hindu law, the taking of *sannyasa* has the same legal implication as physical death. The *sannyasin's* relatives take over his property, and if there are no relatives, his former possessions become the property of the state.

Pondy Arunachala Swamy knew all this, so one day he suggested to Isanya Desikar, 'Why don't I go back to Pondicherry dressed as a householder and claim all my former property from the French government. Then I could sell it all and give all the proceeds to you.'

Isanya Desikar strongly disapproved of his disciple's plan, 'We don't want any money,' he said, 'And furthermore, the *sannyasin's* robe, once donned, should never be removed. If you are still intent on going, I must warn you. You will not return!'

Pondy Arunachala Swamy, who was aggrieved that the government had ended up with all his property, ignored the warning and went to Pondicherry to carry out the plan. He convinced the French government that he was the rightful owner of his ancestral property, took possession of it and auctioned it off. He converted the proceeds into gold, which he loaded on the back of a bullock. His intention was to drive the bullock all the way to Tiruvannamalai with the valuable cargo strapped to its back. However, at the moment of his departure, when he struck the

bullock with a stick to make it start, the bullock, normally a very placid animal, turned on him and gored him to death. The cargo then became the property of the Pondicherry government, but instead of hiding it in their treasury, they decided to use some of it to commemorate the strange and unfortunate accident. They made a statue of Pondy Arunachala Swamy being gored by the bullock and installed it on the western side of Karuvadaikuppam near Muthialpet. The statue can still be seen there today.

A suitable epitaph for Pondy Arunachala Swami can be found in one of Isanya Desikar's verses to Arunachala:

48 Those who ceaselessly seek to find their treasure in gold
do not find anything in it. Not knowing themselves, they
vainly talk about this and that. Spiritual seekers realise
that you alone are the treasure. You are the world, the
creation, the Lord, the Mother. They [the spiritual
seekers] know no one else by you, O Lord of
Arunachala.

Isanya Desikar must have been one of the first Gurus in India to have a western devotee. His name was Ayton and he was the District Collector for the region that extended from Tiruvannamalai to Vriddhachalam. He had heard about the greatness of Isanya Desikar and approached him in the hope of getting a cure for a chronic complaint.

When Isanya Desikar saw him coming he issued his standard warning to the tiger who had been keeping guard over him: 'Lord Arunachala! A European is coming. He may get frightened on seeing you. You had better stay away.' The tiger promptly withdrew.

Ayton came near and prayed to Isanya Desikar to cure him of the tuberculosis from which he had been suffering for many years. Isanya Desikar smiled and after a brief pause spat on the ground. The moment he spat, Ayton was cured of the disease. Ayton then spoke to the holy man with both trepidation and devotion.

'Swami, I have recently acquired a large amount of land, I would like to offer your holiness as much as you need. It can be a permanent endowment in your name.'

Isanya Desikar smiled and asked tauntingly, 'Will your land yield crops even during a drought?'

Then, pointing his finger towards Arunachaleswara and Apeetakuchamba, he added, 'Here is a householder with two children and a large family. It is proper to give him any amount of land, but it is not proper to gift it to me, a *sannyasin*.'

Ayton took leave of him but returned on many occasions. He got into the habit of addressing him reverentially and affectionately as '*Tata*', which means 'grandfather'. It is said that before he began any new project he would always mediate on Isanya Desikar and invoke his blessing by saying, '*Tata*, please lead me in this work. It is your work.' At the annual Deepam festival Ayton would take the lead in dragging the huge temple chariot through the streets of Tiruvannamalai. However, before moving the chariot for the first time he would pick up one of the ropes and exclaim loudly: '*Tata*, you hold the rope and lead us!' The local people were all astounded that such a prominent British official should have such devotion towards a naked *sannyasin*.

Ayton made it a point always to attend and lead this annual festival, but one year he found himself stranded by floods on the

southern side of the River Pennar just before the beginning of the festival. Knowing that he was expected to be at Arunachala to start the chariot on its journey, he called out to his mount: 'Horse, I must see *Tata* and I must also get the Deepam festival started. Think of *Tata* and cross the river!' Without a moment's delay or hesitation, the horse leaped into the raging torrent of water and effortlessly waded to the other side. None of the other people who were stranded dared to follow for they were all convinced that it would be suicidal to enter the surging waters.

At the moment when Ayton put his faith in *Tata* and leaped into the water, Isanya Desikar opened his eyes after a long meditation and stretched out his hand in a southerly direction. When one of his disciples asked what he was doing, he replied, 'If someone falls into a river, should we not save him?'

Ayton arrived safely and took Isanya Desikar's blessings to start the festival. When the news of Ayton's spectacular river crossing and Isanya Desikar's role in it spread among the Deepam crowds, many of them came to the north-eastern side of the hill to see the man who had been responsible for the miracle. The guardian tigers had to withdraw for several days until the crowds subsided. Several of the new visitors turned out to be mature seekers who were looking for guidance from a Guru. Isanya Desikar accepted some as disciples, had a small thatched shed built to accommodate them and gave instruction by writing a guide to liberation entitled *Jnana Kattalai*.

In 1829, when Isanya Desikar was seventy-nine years old, he realised that death would soon come to him. He foresaw the time and date of his passing and wrote the information on a palm leaf that he then concealed under his seat. On the 26th day of the Tamil month of *Margazhi* he told his oldest disciple somewhat cryptically, 'Lord Nataraja is going to the thousand-pillared *mantapam*. We too should go there.' Then he sat in meditation, facing north, with a slight smile on his face. Muthuswami Udayar, realising that his master was about to give up his body, asked him, 'What now will be the fate of us devotees?'

Isanya Desikar replied, 'Has not your family already ripened as a bunch?' and promptly abandoned his body. His devotees chose a *samadhi* site under a bilva tree nearby because they recollected that Isanya Desikar had occasionally stood there and gazed lovingly at the mountain. When the palm leaf that predicted his death was found shortly after his burial, the devotees had one last proof of their master's powers.

See [Garland of Hymns to Arunachala](#) for a translation of some on Isanya Desikar's verses in praise of Arunachala.

(1) The information in this article has been gleaned from a Tamil work, *The Life History of Tiruvannamalai Sri Isanya Jnana Desikar and his Garland of Hymns on Sri Annamalai*, by C. Subbiah Swamikal. It was published in Madras in 1921 and seems to be the only reliable source of information on the saint's life.

Garland of Hymns to Arunachala

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Isanya Desikar's *Garland of Hymns to Arunachala* is a collection of verses on various spiritual themes. After the traditional invocation to Ganesh, he begins by praising Arunachala as the Guru who freed him from spiritual bondage. Soon, though, he moves into a long section in which, following Tamil poetic tradition, he outlines all his faults and pleads for grace to transcend them. Midway through the poem he switches to a shorter metre and again begins to thank Arunachala for his liberation. Next, he moves into a teaching mode and reels off many verses that praise Siva, propound *advaita* philosophy, and offer hints on spiritual practice. The last section, from which I have selected only four verses, is a long series of couplets that either praise Arunachala-Siva or, more frequently, seek his grace.

The translation is based on an unpublished rendering by Dr T. N. Pranatharthi Haran, to whom I give acknowledgements and thanks. The translation of verses from this poem which appear in the biography of Isanya Desikar were done by Sri K. V. Subramanian.



Isanya Desikar

[\(Click on image to enlarge\)](#)

1

Afraid of the foe called 'death', I approached Arunachaleswara.(1) Since now is the time to get rid of all troubles by his grace, I will start to praise the Lord with Tamil songs. Let us worship the feet of the elephant-faced God for the accomplishment of this task.

2

Unapproachable to Brahma and Vishnu, you are the one who encompasses the whole universe. Your devotees, ascertaining that you were grace incarnate in the form of fire, praise your greatness. Taking you as my Guru, I call you 'Lord Arunagiri'.

3

Like a piece of straw being blown about in a cyclone, I was caught up and tricked by *maya*. Out of ignorance I mistook *maya* to be real and was held in bondage by it until you released me and bound me to your feet. O blissful supreme Guru! Father! The Eternal! Consort of Unnamulai residing in Annamalai! How you play with your devotees! In silence you gave my *upadesa*, (2) rendering me speechless at your feet.

4

O Father! The Eternal! Unnamulai's husband living in Annamalai! If you keep quiet, to whom will this slave report? Caught by the devil called 'mind' and frightened by the five elements, to me this

false world appears to be real and fights with me. The cloud of lust kills without killing. Emaciated by karma, I have fallen into the well of the sharp, spear-like eyes of the ladies. Everyone abuses me. Should I go down like this? Since you have created me, protect this poor man.

5

O Father! The Eternal! Consort of Unnamulai who resides in Arunai!(3) When the mind, the five elements and the five senses combine, a false knowledge within the intellect makes the world appear to be real. This is nothing but a magic trick. The mind is wounded when it combines with lust, but still it wallows in the mud of desire. Is there no way to fight and be victorious over these wicked thieves? I believe that you are the Supreme God. So, grace me and remove my difficulties. O Lord, I have surrendered to you. Please protect me.

6

O Father, Eternity itself! Husband of Unnamulai residing in Arunai! The great *maya* is like a mango tree, and the five elements are the seeds that scatter from its fruits. Growing aimlessly, they develop into a forest of lust, anger, and so on. All souls live in this forest, wandering aimlessly, thinking that they are the senses. The evil spirits known as *sankalpas* [intentions] get together and shout aloud that there is no God, and they cry 'It's real!', 'It's not real!' Since this is the situation, bestow on me the proper grace to reach you.

7

I do not know when you will bless me with the state of *mauna*, or when I will become the eternal pure knowledge, full of the light that is unborn. I do not properly learn the path to freedom from the liberated ones, nor do I do service to them. Instead, I go round the world as if in bondage, dumb, like a blind man, caught in the birth-cycle created by *maya*. How I have suffered! Protect me with your radiant *jnana*.

8

O Father! The Eternal! Husband of Mother Unnamulai residing in Arunai! Like a lame man who cannot reach out for wild honey, I am unable to realise your greatness. You are the plenitude, the knowledge and bliss attained by yoga. Bondage, actions, illusion and desires expand from one to a hundred, and then to a thousand. If one of them leaves, the others pull me down. I believe in you alone. Kindly tell me on which day I will receive the direct experience that is flawless, supportless, and the unbroken whole. Raise me up from the eight-limbed yogic states to the sovereign state of true Siva-*jnana*.

10

O Father! The Eternal! Consort of Mother Unnamulai residing in Arunai! What can I say? Though it is known that all things will pass away, the mind still regards them as real. Ignorance fights with me. This mind, joining hands with the intellect and the ego, goes astray and ends up wandering in the forest, weeping and wailing. How can I overcome the mind? Blissful plenitude! Eternal grace! Clearly show me the truth or entrust me to the hands of your devotees.

11

O Supreme Bliss! Eternal Plenitude! Teacher of *Nama Sivaya*! You who cannot be approached by the *Agamas*, the *Puranas*, the

Itihasas (4) and the *Vedas*! Father! Eternal One! The husband of Mother Unnamulai who resides in Arunai! Please instruct me about the supreme state: the single, infinite state that is full of silence, in which the flood of the unified taste of peace prevails, where the body and all enjoyments are blissfully forgotten, where true knowledge shines like the sun. This is the yogic state that is called 'Being still'.

12

Eternal One! Consort of Unnamulai residing in Arunai! Without knowing the Self, I played with the body through the senses, the breath and the mind. I thought that I was born and that I will die. I considered my parents, women, the world and all its enjoyments to be real. But then you possessed me and made me join the select band of your devotees. You made me realise the complete knowledge that has neither birth nor death and let me enjoy the simple essence of remaining as the Self. O Father, thank you so much!

13

The five sheaths, the three bodies, the five elements, the ten organs, the four *karanas*, (5) the soul, etc., together constitute birth and death. But all this is only a trick. Before you they fade away like darkness before the sun. Am I different from your own real nature? What then is happiness and sorrow, what are the *karmas* I have done? O my possessor, the Golden Hill! Embodiment of grace, plenitude itself! The Self in all souls! Sonachala [Red Hill], you have entered me.

14

Self of all souls on earth! Lord of the Red Hill! Not knowing how I came, without having knowledge of even the sun and the moon, of day and night, I became a plaything of fate. By not thinking of you till now I became egotistical in many ways. Tell me, what is the body? What is the soul? What is 'in' and 'out'? Other than you I have nowhere else to go. As complete bliss you have entered into me. Will you now possess me like the scent in a flower and merge me with your devotees?

15

You have entered into me but somehow the world still appears to me to be real. On this earth you are complete bliss, the Self of all souls. Bondage in the form of birth and death has crept in without my knowledge. If I analyse, I discover that it is nothing but the mind. The *Vedas* proclaim that all this is a function of the mind, but still I remain ignorant. *Bhakti* is flooding. Lord of the Red Hill! Make me understand this by your grace.

16

Like the scent in a flower, like the taste in honey, blissfully you have entered into me. Self of all souls! Lord of the Red Hill! Immanently you pervade the whole world, manifesting as the sky, the wind, fire, water, earth, the moon, the sun and the individual soul. You are the soul, the 'you' and the 'I'. Up till now I have considered the world, which is only a mirage-like appearance, to be real. Who am I? What is this body? What is it that speaks 'I'? What are all these relationships that appear as 'father', 'mother', 'women'? Tell me!

18

Lord of the Red Hill! Self of the souls! You have entered me! I do not know how to worship devotedly with flowers, as prescribed by

the *Agamas*.⁽⁶⁾ Nor do I now how to dance, how to worship with folded hands,⁽⁷⁾ how to go round the temple, or recite hymns. I do not know how to serve those among your devotees who are liberated. I have failed to get instructions from them on how to get release from bondage. Up until now I have wasted my days by mixing with ignorant people. Please reveal to me the eternal truth of your own Self.

20

Self of all souls on earth, existing beyond the mind, you are the plenitude of bliss! Lord of the Red Hill. You have entered me! Standing as the light through which the eye sees, you show me your form. From you arise, in the ear, songs, melodies, poetry and other sounds. The taste of earth on the tongue, the scent of a flower in the nose, the wind in the ear, the bite of a mosquito on the skin - all proclaim and announce you. Since you make me feel everything, from where, then, arises the sense or feeling of 'I'?

21

Plenitude of bliss! Self of all souls on this earth! Lord of the Red Hill! You have entered me! After controlling the senses, I should worship you eternally with the flower of grace. Only then will I cross the shore. God unknown even to the gods! How can I praise you who are Truth itself? I myself know nothing, so all I can do is beg from you. Supreme Deity! Bliss incarnate! You should not despise me just because I am false and know nothing of you.

22

Lord of the Red Hill! As complete bliss you have become the Self of all souls and entered me. Will you please tell me how the following pairs came into existence: the beginning and the end, men and gods, the arts and the *Vedas*, mother and father? What is this strong, binding karma? What pleasures and pains does the body undergo in heaven and hell? And what is it that remains beyond all this as 'I'? Is it fair for you, the omnipresent one, to fail me? You are the first, the head of all others, so please show me your grace.

23

Lord of the Red Hill! Silent Guru! Flawless gem! All the universe is like an atom or a mustard seed before you. All the worlds derive light from you, as light is obtained from the sun. Knowledge and ignorance, *pujas* and *japas*, and all the supporting rituals - who are they for? Who made the clouds wander about in the sky? O Nataraja! Culmination of the rare *Vedas*! Everything is your greatness. You play on the earth, in the ether, and transcend them both. You are beyond speech and mind.

25

O flawless gem worshipped by Brahma and Vishnu! Lord of the Red Hill! Guru who gives silent *upadesa*! Not knowing intuitively what the body and soul are, I think instead about how the world came into existence. Is it because of my old karma that my mind gets bogged down in these worldly matters? The fire of ego pulls me strongly, but what can I do about it? I will seek refuge in you, my true God. I have faith in your feet.

26

O flawless gem! Lord of the Red Hill! Guru who teaches in silence! Like waves in the ocean, one world expands into a hundred, a thousand, a crore [ten million] and then ten crores, all within a minute. Thoughts enter the ghost-like mind and flow outwards to become the universe. All relationships - mother, father, relatives -

are merely a delusion. If facts could be ascertained I would find that my previous births were as dogs, jackals, and so on. The mind believes all these things to be real, even my previous births. Because I didn't believe in your grace, I had to die and be reborn.

27

Culminating dancer of the *Vedas*! Flawless gem! Lord of the Red Hill! Guru who instructs in silence! Deluded as I was, I did not believe your grace to be real. You are the one without a second, as clearly revealed as the fruit in the hand that appears in vedic and agamic stories.(8) It appears to be real, but if this is reality, I am blindly wandering in the forest of dualistic differences. People talk about the different types of liberation. Will it ever be possible to speak of your greatness, the perfection of your bliss?

30

Flawless gem! Lord of the Red Hill! Guru giving silent *upadesa*! Like a lethal spear in the hands of a king, the eyes of women destroy men and throw them into the muddy well of karma. How to get out of the well and become happy? After your glance of grace, it is easy to triumph over the dull intellect and be alone.

34

You who are unattainable even by Vishnu, Brahma and the *devas*! (9) Tell me that one word that will enable me to receive your grace and attain the egoless state. Your southward-facing body of grace spoke of truth and knowledge to the four.(10) Dweller in Arunai, You are an ocean of grace! O supreme Lord who dwells in Kailash, (11) how superior you are to the *devas*!

35

Supreme Lord, unknown even by the *devas*! Dweller in Kailash! Like a cloud enveloping the sky, mind and *maya* cover up the reality. Through this *maya* births appear and good and bad prevail. Will you despise me and forget me? Flawless Guru-Lord! Body of grace! You are the beginning, the middle and the end. Show me that grace which has the taste of honey.

36

Dweller in Kailash and Arunai! Truth Supreme, unknown even to the gods! You are time, space, name and form. How can I control the mind which, caught in bondage, wanders out through the five senses? Why have I always so far thought that I am the body? How to know the truth? Where is the direct experience? By what process is it known? O True Light! Kindly grant me the grace to unite my mind to you.

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Photo of Arunachala, courtesy Dev Gogoi

(1) Arunachaleswara, or 'Lord Arunachala' is the name of the presiding deity in the Tiruvannamalai Temple. It is also a synonym for the mountain itself. Unnamulai (meaning 'She whose breasts have never been suckled', is the Tamil name of Siva's consort in the temple.

(2) *Upadesa* means 'teaching'. Usually it implies the teaching given by a guru to a disciple.

(3) Another of the many names of Arunachala.

(4) The *Puranas* are the books that primarily contain the stories and myths surrounding the major Hindu deities. The *itihasas* are the large epics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*.

(5) The five sheaths, called *kosas*, cover and hide the Self. According to Yoga philosophy the ego functions in the world through these five sheaths. They are: (1) *annamaya kosa*, 'the sheath of food', meaning the physical body. (2) *pranamaya kosa*, 'the sheath of *prana*'. *Prana* is the life-force (sometimes called

the 'vital breath') that animates and sustains the body. It is intimately connected with breathing. (3) *manomaya kosa*, 'the sheath of the mind'. (4) *vijnanamaya kosa*, 'the sheath of the intellect'. This is the so-called 'higher mind' that calculates and judges the information stored in and collected by the lower mind and comes to appropriate conclusions. (5) *anandamaya kosa*, 'the sheath of bliss'. This is the experience of the ego when it is not associated with the mind or the body.

The three bodies are the physical (*sthula sarira*), the subtle (*sukshma sarira*) and the causal (*karana sarira*). The physical body is the first *kosa*, the subtle body is made up of *kosas* two, three and four; the causal body, the state of the ego during sleep, is the fifth *kosa*.

The ten organs refer to the five *karmendriyas* and the five *jnanendriyas*, the faculties through which one moves, feels and senses. The four 'inner organs' (*antahkaranas*) are mind (*manas*), intellect (*buddhi*), memory (*chitta*) and ego (*ahankara*).

(6) There are twenty-eight Saiva Agamas. Saivas give them ultimate authority on all matters relating to ritual worship.

(7) Palms together, either in front of the chest or over the head.

(8) In Tamil, 'As clear as the fruit on the palm of the hand' denotes something that is self-evident, needing no further proof. Usually the fruit cited is a nelli, a gooseberry-like fruit that grows on a tree.

(9) When Isanya Desikar talks about *devas* he mostly seems to be referring to the minor deities who inhabit the heavenly world ruled by Indra. On some occasions, though, he uses the term to include all deities except Siva himself.

(10) Siva in the form of Dakshinamurti [meaning 'southward facing'] gave silent *darshan* and *upadesa* to four *rishis* and enlightened them all. The verse actually says, 'body of grace in a northern direction'. This may mean that, relative to the *rishis*, Siva was to the north.

(11) Kailash, a mountain in southern Tibet, is the traditional home of Siva. Isanya Desikar seems to regard Siva as a being who resides simultaneously in both Kailash and Arunachala.



37

Dweller in Aruna and Kailash! The Supreme, unknown even to the *devas*! The blind, delusive ignorance stalking through my intellect can only be removed when the sun of your grace shines there. So declare the *Vedas*. My mind suffers from the delusion that this earthly life is real. It values relationships such as father, mother, wife and son and thinks that they are also real. Kindly make my mind clear. Show me your grace.

39

Dweller in Arunai and Kailash! Supreme Truth that even the *devas* cannot know! Of what use is it to relinquish my family and other relationships? By wandering among the people who give alms, and by suffering, I have not achieved anything. I have not mingled with your devotees and worshipped their feet. My unmelted mind remains like a stone. Make me think of your feet, for I have not yet reached the ocean of your kindness.

40

Dweller in Kailash! Dweller in Arunagiri! Supreme, true Lord who cannot be comprehended by lesser gods! By studying and by directly realising, I should have controlled the mind that always runs out towards the world. I should have immersed myself in the still and waveless ocean of your grace. With purity, and without any attachments, I should be offering devoted worship to you. O flawless one, teach me all this! You have taught and liberated sages like Sanaka.(12). You are the first cause. Even Brahma and Vishnu were unable to comprehend who you are. You who are knowledge itself, show me your grace.

41

Resident of both Arunai and Kailash! Supreme God unknown by lesser gods! The *Agamas* declare that you are the beginning, the middle and the end, that you are full of knowledge. By your grace devotees have intuitively found you and become deathless. By catching hold of the vibration of *Om*, your devotees have merged with you, like light into light, space into space, and by acquiring pure knowledge have become consciousness itself. So say many sacred books. Show me too your benign grace.

42

Dweller in Arunai and Kailash! Truth Supreme, unknown even to the gods! Some of your devotees danced; some wept and cried out of love; some worshipped you everywhere, weeping, and praising with flowers in their hands. What is the karma that prevents me from worshipping you like this? Thinking that the world is real, I wandered around hankering after money. I went after women and contracted diseases. O my Lord, though this was my condition, you came in search of me and bestowed your grace.

43

Lord of Arunai, I salute you! O Light! The great light unknown even to the *devas*! Have you, abiding in the joyous company of your devotees, forgotten me? Do you regard me as trash? Other than you, you who have taken possession of me, do I have any other support?

44

Lord of Arunai who dances at the end of the wonderful *Vedas*! You have already told me, 'There exists one alone. It appears as the three worlds,(13) the soul and the Supreme Lord. It is grace. It alone shines as the Guru and as the Supreme *Brahman*.'

45

Lord of Arunai, I salute you! By shining as fire, you have removed my forgetfulness. You showed me your grace by telling me, 'Get relief from this dream by looking at your own Self'. In the three states of waking, dreaming and sleeping, none of the three bodies knows who he really is. Nor do they know where the 'I'-feeling is located. It was your instructions alone that saved me.

47

Lord of Arunai, I salute you! You destroyed the power of the mind which, assuming the form of the false ego, construes the world as something real. You broke the ego that identifies the Self with the body. You rooted out lust and gave me a clear vision of heaven. How gracious you are!

48

People speak about gold and gems as having varied properties. Similarly, without knowing the Self, they talk about it in different ways. Lord of Arunai, this is pitiful. True devotees know you alone, the one and only truth that appears as the world, the soul and God.

49

The Lord residing in Arunagiri appeared before me as my Guru in order to lift me up. Placing his feet lovingly on my head, He blessed me with the words, 'This is the time'. He made me experience *sat-chit-ananda*, cut off the delusion of death and enveloped me in silence. How great he is!

51

Lord, Guru and Father! My friend residing in the Heart! Flawless gem! King who dances in the dancing hall of the Heart! True friend! Omnipresent plenitude! Eternal flawless bliss! Destroyer of bondage! Supreme yogi instructing like a Guru! How great you are!

53

How I praise you, my Lord, the Supreme! I believed in *Nama Sivaya*. Unapproachable by Indra, Brahma, Vishnu and others, you are the *sat-chit-ananda* that has possessed me.

54

I praise you as the flame that is beyond and inside all the worlds as

the light within the light. O true knowledge and bliss! Culmination of the *Vedas*! You found the right place and possessed me with your breath.

55

Dweller in Arunai! Unknowable even by the *devas*! Easily accessible to devotees, you are where all words end. You are both the sight and the seer. Your dance is omnipresent, but even the *devas* are unable to comprehend it.

57

Sat-chit-ananda shining as 'I am He'! By manifesting love to your feet, I understood you to be king. You made me praise your blissful form and become silent. Kindly liberate me.

58

The end of the *Vedas* [i.e. the *Upanishads*] proclaim that if you think without thought of the eternal, blissful Lord who shines everywhere as *Sakti* and *Sivam*, that devotion itself is liberation. Through that experience of liberation consciousness becomes great.

60

Supreme Light! Consciousness itself! Shining flame of Arunai, I praise you as the unbroken light, without beginning or end. I call out to you, 'My jewel! My Guru! You are flawless nectar!'

62

All learning and knowledge come through God's grace. Other than that, what will we learn? I attained silence; now please give me the knowledge to get rid of births. Those who hold onto their undying Self as *Sivam*, they alone attain clarity.

63

O Supreme! Everything we hold onto is false. The immanent knowledge is Siva. He is without flaw or error, and has no form or character. He is pure and blissful. Let us worship him and be happy.

64

The *Vedas*, the Guru's teachings and the experience of one's own Self are all one in the vision of that light that forms the substratum and gives light to the sun, the moon and fire. In the Heart, where there is neither day nor night, the light is experienced as the Supreme Siva.

65

I worshipped the Supreme Siva and by plunging into the ocean of his grace, found him to be the substratum. The bliss experienced by his devotees is inexplicable. Even the *Vedas* and the *Agamas* fail to describe it.

66

Assimilator of all, shining as the Self! You are everything, and nothing is outside you. King! Guru! Knowledge! You are form; you are the path; you dance as 'I' and 'you'. Undiminishing knowledge, you shine within your devotees as the unbroken Supreme Siva!

67

O Siva! Consciousness itself shining in the minds of devotees! You are the one, the auspicious, the undivided whole! Self that shines at the end of *tapas*! Father of Arunai, You remove unholy *karmas*!

68

O mind, listen and kindly understand: Siva, the all-pervading consciousness, is eternal; he is flawless, purity, completeness, the self-shining light of knowledge. He is the Father dwelling in

Arunai.

69

O worried mind, you are always wandering in the countryside and the forest. Offering love to the feet of the Guru, I will tell you the truth: 'The Supreme shines as pure knowledge. Merge there and realise.'

70

By devotion to the Supreme *Sadguru*, peerless wisdom can be attained. Praise the Guru as the one who has attained liberation, as the consciousness of Siva, as God, as the eternal bliss, as absolute fullness, as true *jnana* and the Self.

71

The devotees praise him with complete devotion. Though he is the Self, they will praise him with infinite names. He shines in the flawless intellect, not different from it. With infinite love let us adorn our heads with his feet.

72

Learning and knowledge are God's alone. By continuous love, the plenitude is attained. If this is gained, bliss continuously flows and future births cease.

73

There are many ways to reach the Self, and many teachings that are hard to understand. The wise think that these various instructions are just impediments. They simply relinquish speech and mind.

74

You have had many thoughts arising out of *sankalpa*,⁽¹⁴⁾ but what did you gain by them? Your intellect got spoiled because it became full of fear and thoughts of danger. If you reach the feet of the Guru, taintless wisdom will certainly dawn in you. So, the acceptable way is to seek the aid of grace for realising the truth.

75

The mad chase after mantras. Crazy people get caught in the ego, in *maya*, praise many gods and follow the tantric ways. Why do you run insanely after all this? The world is made, and so is religion. They are all incapable of praising the beautiful flame of wisdom.

76

The Self, fulness and perfection, can neither be described nor rejected. It is a state of bliss and knowledge beyond words, having no day and no night. It is called *nishtha* by the *Vedas*.⁽¹⁵⁾ The Self, complete in itself, is not something that can be caught hold of.

77

The one omnipresent self-effulgent Supreme Being is everywhere, shining as light. So what does it matter whether we worship, or do *puja*, or praise inside or outside?

78

What Supreme shall we catch hold of? What is it that catches? The undivided whole, knowledge itself, is that Supreme. The greatness of those who can directly speak of this is indescribable.

79

Those who are adorned by the feet of the silent great ones will certainly attain realisation. It is blissful to praise the Lord, but if one has the benefit of being looked at by the Master, one becomes that peace and bliss.

80

No amount of learning can teach one to give up the ego. The best course is to catch hold of what is real, without any support. He who

is fully conscious is really God. He is the real nature of one's own true state. The experience is silence; it cannot speak.

81

They are truly great who live without the mind. Is there anything other than the Self? The state of *sat-chit-ananda*, alone is real. Those who are in *nishtha*, without any activity, they alone are realised.

82-85

It is sheer delight to speak of Lord Aruna, the Light who is both beginningless and endless, unbroken, infinite space. It is sheer delight to say that Lord Aruna, the Light, is the source giving light to the sun, the moon, and fire. At the moment when one realises the Self by diving within, you become the face on the mirror. O personification of grace! What else needs to be known other than you who are omnipresent and who possess all?

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(12) Sanaka is one of the four sages taught by Dakshinamurti. The other three are Sanandana, Sanatkumara and Sanatsujata. All four of them are sons of Brahma, created by his mind.

(13) The realms of Brahma, Vishnu and Siva. Alternatively, it may indicate the worlds of *devas*, *asuras* and human beings. The series of shorter verses, referred to in the introduction, begin with verse forty-three.

(14) The motive or intention for performing an act.

(15) Derived from a word which means 'balanced' or 'in a state of equilibrium', it denotes a state in which one is unwaveringly established in the Self.

TAMIL TRANSLATIONS

There are two complete texts that appear exclusively in this section:

1. [Tiruvadavur Adigal Puranam](#), a 15th century biography of the Tamil saint Manikkavachagar
2. [Sorupa Saram](#), a hundred-verse poem on the *advaita* experience that was composed by Sorupananda, a 16th century Tamil Guru.

Translations of other Tamil works appear on this site in different categories. The following works are all poems in praise of Arunachala that were composed by saints who realised the Self through the power of the mountain:

3. [Annamalai Venba](#), by Guru Namasivaya.
4. [Arunagiri Antadi](#), by Guhai Namasivaya.
5. [Arunagiri Malai](#), by Guhai Namasivaya
6. [Svanubhava Stotra Pamalai](#), by Isanya Jnana Desikar.

The following two poems were composed by Arunagirinatha, a Tamil saint who lived in Tiruvannamalai about 500 years ago:

7. [Kandar Anubhuti](#)
8. [Perutta Vachanam](#)

The following four works, which contain the teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi, can be found in the section about his life and teachings:

9. [Upadesa Undiyar](#)
10. [Who am I?](#)
11. [Guru Vachaka Kovai](#)
12. [Ramana Puranam](#)
13. [Upadesa Tiruvahaval](#)

A translation of Manikkavachagar's '[Siva Puranam](#)', the first poem of Tiruvachakam, can be found at the end of [Ramana Puranam](#). Other translations from the *Tiruvachakam* can be found in the article [Bhagavan, Manikkavachagar and the Tiruvachakam](#).

Many verses by the 18th century saint Thayumanavar can be found in the article [Bhagavan and Thayumanavar](#).

A chapter from *Arunachala Puranam*, a long poem that describes the myths associated with Arunachala, can be found in [King Vallalan of Tiruvannamalai](#). [Prabhulinga Leelai](#), [Gorakka Gati](#): this is a translation of a commentary on a chapter from a work by Sivaprakasa Swami that Ramana Maharshi often referred to.

Sorupa Saram

(The Essence of One's Own True Nature)

by Sorupananda

Sorupa Saram (also known as *Swarupa Saram* when it is spelt in the Sanskrit way) is a Tamil advaitic work that was composed by Sorupananda, a distinguished Tamil saint and Guru who lived near Virai, a Tamil town, probably around the end of the sixteenth century. He is associated historically with Tattvarayar, an eminent scholar who was also his sister's son. The following biographical information about them has been taken from a Tamil introduction to *Sorupa Saram*(1)

Sorupananda and Tattvarayar were fluent in Sanskrit and Tamil, and both were learned in all the *sastras*. However, the true realisation dawned upon them that the profit to be gained from this limited knowledge, however praiseworthy, did not have the power to grant freedom from birth in the way that true knowledge does. They realised that it showed a lack of judgement on their part to devote their time any longer to the acquisition of this limited knowledge, which confers advantages in this life only. By doing so, they would waste a human birth, something that is very hard to attain. Since they were both overcome by a desire to free themselves from worldly attachments, they devoted themselves to the task of seeking out a *Sadguru* who could bestow *jnana*.

Having made this resolution, the two of them, before leaving their dwelling-place, made an agreement with one another: 'Whichever of us is first to obtain the fortune of a Guru's *darshan*, he shall assume the position of Guru to the other.'

They then set out on a pilgrimage, Sorupananda to the South, and Tattvarayar to the North. Upon the banks of the Kaveri, in a holy place called Govattam, Sorupananda had a miraculous experience in which he attained a tranquillity of mind that had thus far eluded him.

'This occurrence is due to the presence here of some great *mahatma*,' he decided.

Upon consulting the learned people in that place, he discovered that a great being called Sri Sivaprakasa Swami dwelt there in a patch of rushes, immersed in perpetual *samadhi*. However, he ascertained that on a few occasions he had been known to come outside in the morning time.

Going immediately to the holy presence of that *Sadguru*, he waited until Sivaprakasa Swami emerged from his state of absorption and came outside. Making obeisance in the proper manner, he beseeched him to accept him as his devotee. When he had received the Guru's grace, Sorupananda waited for Tattvarayar's return.

Tattvarayar had travelled to the North, but he had not obtained the *darshan* of any Guru. When he lost all hope of doing so, he gave up his search and returned to the South. On his way, he had the good fortune to meet Sorupananda, who by that time had realised the Self. Tattvarayar then received the grace of his uncle.

Whilst Sorupananda and Tattvarayar were peacefully dwelling in this way as Guru and disciple, Sorupananda one day ordered that oil be brought for an oil bath. Since that day was *amavasai* [new moon], the disciple was acutely aware of the *sastraic* injunction that an oil bath was forbidden on the day of the ancestors.

[Sorupa Saram \(PDF\)](#)

[Finnish Transation of Sorupa Saram \(PDF\)](#)

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‘But today is *amavasai*,’ he said.

On hearing this, Sorupananda said: ‘What have all the prohibitions of the *sastras* to do with *sadhus*? Although you have dwelt in my presence for many days, you remain unable to free yourself from the constraints of the *sastras*. Is there really any advantage in your remaining here any longer?’

Thus, by means of this question and answer, he confirmed his suspicion that for Tattvarayar birth was not yet at an end. Tattvarayar was shocked by these compassionate words from his Guru. Realising that he had not yet succeeded in eliminating his *vasanas*, he was filled with remorse.

He came to the following decision: ‘Rather than remaining here and besmirching the holy presence of my Guru, it would be better to drown this sinful block beneath the ocean.’

Then, realising that it was forbidden to turn one’s back on the Guru, he retired, slowly moving backwards.

When Tattvarayar was departing in this way, meditating on his Guru, the devotees who were accompanying him took down the gems of truth that came out of his lips as his divine utterances and submitted them to Sorupanandar. These words were published in *jnana* texts that are revered even today.

When Sorupananda saw these works he was astonished by their profundity. Realising in his heart that such a sea of learning did not deserve to drown in the watery ocean, he commanded Tattvarayar to return to his presence.

As soon as Tattvarayar returned Sorupananda said to him: ‘These difficult works, useful as they are to yourself, will not easily benefit the world as a whole. Compose, therefore, a simple work that everyone may understand and win salvation from.’

After giving this command, Sorupananda went off to eat. In accordance with his Guru’s wishes Tattvarayar composed and completed *Cacivanna Bodham* while his Guru was still eating. This work became part of the *Mohavatai Bharani*.

Ramana Maharshi was particularly fond of the next development in the story. This is how he narrated the story. The extract is from *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, 21st November 1945:

Tattvarayar composed a *bharani* [a kind of poetical composition in Tamil] in honour of his Guru, Sorupananda, and convened an assembly of learned pandits to hear the work and assess its value. The pandits raised the objection that a *bharani* was only composed in honour of great heroes capable of killing a thousand elephants, and that it was not in order to compose such a work in honour of an ascetic. Thereupon the author said, ‘Let us all go to my Guru and we shall have this matter settled there’. They went to the Guru and, after all had taken their seats, the author told his Guru the purpose of their coming there. The Guru sat silent and all the others also remained in *mauna*. The whole day passed, night came, and some more days and nights, and yet all sat there silently, no thought at all occurring to any of them and nobody thinking or asking why they had come there. After three or four days like this, the Guru moved his mind a bit and thereupon the assembly regained their thought activity. They then declared, ‘Conquering a thousand elephants is nothing beside this Guru’s power

to conquer the rutting elephants of all our egos put together. So certainly he deserves the *bharani* in his honour!’

Though Tattvaraya was the author of many verses (most of which have disappeared) Sorupananda himself only wrote one poem. This was *Sorupa Saram*, a distillation of his advaitic experience. This work was highly regarded by Ramana Maharshi. When he gave Annamalai Swami a list of six books to read, he included *Sorupa Saram* on a list that also included *Kaivalya Navaneetam*, *Ribhu Gita*, *Ashtavakra Gita*, *Ellam Ondre*, and *Yoga Vasishtha*. This recommendation puts the text in very distinguished company.

This is the first-ever English translation of *Sorupa Saram*. It has been translated by Dr T. V. Venkatasubramanian and Robert Butler and edited by David Godman. The verses themselves are by Sorupananda and the interpolated questions, answers and comments are by a later, unknown commentator. However, these additional remarks have always been associated with the work and they are now regarded as being an integral part of it.

1. [Sorupa Saram](#)
2. [Finnish Translation of Sorupa Saram](#)



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(1) *Sorupa Saram*, pub. Kasyapa Nagarajan, 1971.

Tiruvadavur Adigal Puranam

In this page:

In the seventh to ninth centuries AD there appeared in South India an upsurge of devotional fervour that completely transformed the religious inclinations and practices of the region. Vaishnava and Saiva *bhaktas* became infused with a religious spirit that emphasised ecstatic devotion to a personal deity rather than the more sober rites and rituals of vedic Brahmanism. It was both a populist Hindu revolt, since it expressed the people's dissatisfaction with the hierarchies of caste,(1) and a demonstration of contempt for the alien philosophies of Jainism and Buddhism which had by then permeated large areas of South India.

The movement's leaders were the various saints who toured the countryside singing songs in praise of their personal God. The language of these songs was deliberately simple, for they were intended to be sung by ordinary devotees, either alone or in groups. While it is true that the deities addressed were ones such as Vishnu and Siva, who were prominent components of the North Indian pantheon, the mode of expression and the philosophical content of the poems were unique, being an expression of the indigenous Tamil spirit and culture. This was the first of the great *bhakti* movements that were to invigorate the Hindu tradition throughout India in the succeeding centuries. It was so successful in transforming the hearts and minds of the South Indian population, one commentator has gone so far as to say that these poet-saints 'sang Buddhism and Jainism out of South India.'(2)

The Saiva revival of this era owed much to four poet-saints who are often collectively referred to as 'the four' (*Nalvar*). Appar, the first to emerge, flourished from the end of the sixth century until the middle of the seventh. Tirujnanasambandar, the next to appear, was a younger contemporary of his. They were followed by Sundaramurti (end of the seventh century until the beginning of the eighth) and Manikkavachagar, whom most people believe lived in the ninth century.(3)

Appar the earliest of the *Nalvar* explained in the following famous verses the essence of this new approach to religion and how it differed from the conventional prevailing ideas on the subject:

Why bathe in Ganga's streams or Kaveri?
Why go to Comorin in Kongu's land?
Why seek the waters of the surrounding sea?
Release is theirs and theirs alone who call
in every place upon the Lord of all.
Why chant the Vedas, hear the *sastras*' lore?
Why daily teach the books of righteousness?
Why the *Vedangas* six say o'er and o'er?
Release is theirs and theirs alone whose heart
From thinking of the Lord shall ne'er depart.
Why roam the jungle, roam the cities through?
Why plague life with unstinting penance hard?
Why eat no flesh and gaze into the blue?
Release is theirs and theirs alone who cry
unceasing to the Lord of wisdom high.
Why fast and starve, why suffer pains austere?
Why climb the mountains doing penance harsh?
Why go to bathe in waters far and near?
Release is theirs and theirs alone who call

[Invocation](#)

[1: The King's Minister](#)

[2: Holy Perunturai](#)

[3: The Delivery of the Horses](#)

[4: The Navy](#)

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[7: The Gaining of the Divine Feet](#)

at every time upon the Lord of all.(4)

The spontaneous songs of these early Saiva *bhaktas* were eventually collected and recorded in a series of books called the *Tirumurais*. The first seven (there are twelve in all) are devoted exclusively to the songs of Appar, Tirujnanasambandar and Sundaramurti, while the eighth contains Manikkavachagar's two extant works. These twelve *Tirumurais*, along with the later *Meykanda Sastras*, became the canonical works of the southern Saiva branch of Hinduism. This system of beliefs and practices is still the most prevalent form of religion in South India.

Biographical details of the lives of Appar, Jnanasambandar and Sundaramurti can be found in the *Periyapuranam*, the anthology of the lives of sixty-three of the early Saiva saints that was composed about a thousand years ago. The life of Manikkavachagar was not included. For information on Manikkavachagar's life one has to turn to two other sources: the *Tiruvilaiyatal Puranam*, which records divine and miraculous events that are associated with Madurai and its temple, and *Tiruvadavur Adigal Puranam*, a poetical rendering of Manikkavachagar's life that was probably written around 1,400 AD.

The *Tiruvilaiyatal Puranam* contains four chapters (58-61) about Manikkavachagar, and the oldest version is believed to date from the twelfth century. However, the text is clearly based on a much older oral tradition since Manikkavachagar, writing in the ninth century, refers to several stories that were later recorded in this *Puranam*. The *Tiruvadavur Adigal Puranam* expands on this earlier narrative by adding further elements that seem to have been part of an oral tradition. It also makes use of material from the *Tiruvachakam*, Manikkavachagar's most famous work.

The *Tiruvachakam* is, and has been for more than a thousand years, one of the most well-known and best-loved works of Tamil devotional literature. It is so highly regarded that parts of it are chanted every day in many South Indian temples. Parts of *Tiruvachakam* were chanted regularly during the early days of Sri Ramanasramam, and on the evening that his mother died, Ramana Maharshi asked all the assembled devotees to spend the night chanting the whole work. Manikkavachagar's justly deserved fame and reputation rest almost exclusively on the eminence of this one devotional work.

I should mention in passing that Manikkavachagar came to Tiruvannamalai during an extended pilgrimage, and while he was there, he composed *Tiruvembavai*, the seventh hymn of the *Tiruvachakam* collection. This poem tradition holds that it was composed at Adi-Annamalai while the author was doing *pradakshina* is one of the most famous literary works in the Tamil language. It has been extensively written about and commented on, and in recent times its popularity has been enhanced even more by the activities of the former senior Sankaracharya of Kanchipuram, Sri Chandrasekharendra Saraswati Swami. *Tiruvembavai* was a particular favourite of his and during his lifetime he did much to encourage its popularity. Nowadays, as a result of the Sankaracharya's enthusiastic efforts, the poem is sung throughout the length and breadth of the Tamil-speaking world during the Tamil month of Margazhi (mid-December to mid-January) and during this period conferences and meetings are held all over the state to discuss and expound on the meaning of this one

poem.

The text that I am posting here is a complete translation of *Tiruvadavur Adigal Puranam*, the more elaborate and detailed of the two Manikkavachagar biographies. The translation has been done by Robert Butler, some of whose work appears elsewhere on this site. This is the first time that this work has ever appeared in an English translation. A summary of the work is given below, along with the corresponding verses in the text.



[Invocation](#)



[Chapter One: The King's Minister](#)

The story begins with an account of Manikkavachagar's birth and childhood. After demonstrating himself to be a child prodigy who excelled in all branches of knowledge, he was appointed chief minister of the Pandyan kingdom at the age of sixteen. Though he was given all the accoutrements of worldly power, he realised the emptiness of worldly life and secretly longed to meet a teacher who would bestow on him true knowledge. An opportunity to meet such a Guru arose when the Pandyan king, hearing that valuable horses were available at the port of Perunturai, sent Manikkavachagar there to buy them on his behalf.



[Chapter Two: Holy Perunturai](#)

The chapter begins on Mount Kailas with various gods paying their respects to Siva. Siva then announced that it was time for him to go to the world of men in order to become Manikkavachagar's Guru. He ordered many of the celestial beings to come with him, disguised as earthly devotees, and headed for Perunturai, the port on the Tamil coast where Manikkavachagar had been sent to buy horses for his king. Siva waited for his arrival in a grove of trees.

When the advance guard of Manikkavachagar's escort informed the chief minister that a great sage was sitting under a kuruntham tree in that grove, he immediately went there in the hope that this teacher could grant him liberation. Manikkavachagar paid his respects and asked Siva to bestow true knowledge on him. Though Siva was disguised as an earthly being, Manikkavachagar knew intuitively that it was Siva himself who had taken the form of a human Guru. Siva agreed to accept him as his disciple, and preparations were made for a great initiation ceremony. Manikkavachagar performed an elaborate ritual worship, after which Siva placed his feet on Manikkavachagar's head and granted him liberation. Manikkavachagar profusely expressed his thanks and gratitude. Siva then gave a long speech in which he summed up Saiva philosophy and when the explanation was concluded, Manikkavachagar expressed his love and gratitude by handing over to him all the treasure that the king had given to him to buy horses. He declared that he would stay with Siva and not return to Madurai. Manikkavachagar's party returned home to inform the king of what had happened.

The king was, quite naturally, very angry with Manikkavachagar. He sent him a written message, demanding that he return to Madurai immediately. Manikkavachagar refused to read the message himself, but he allowed one of the emissaries to read it out to him. Once he had heard what the king had written, Manikkavachagar took the message to Siva and asked him what he should do. Siva undertook to bring the horses to Madurai on a

particular day. He also gave Manikkavachagar a very valuable ruby as a present to give to the king and asked him to return to Madurai. On his arrival in Madurai, Manikkavachagar gave the king the ruby and promised that the horses would arrive on the day that Siva had specified. The king initially accepted his story. However, some of the people who had accompanied Manikkavachagar told the king what they had witnessed in Perunturai, saying that they had seen Manikkavachagar give away all the king's treasure to a spiritual teacher. The king sent messengers to Perunturai to see if there really were any horses that were due to come to Madurai, and when these emissaries reported that there were not, he ordered Manikkavachagar to be thrown in jail. As a further punishment he was made to stand outside in the fierce heat of the sun, from where he launched a passionate appeal to Siva to save him.



[Chapter Three: The Delivery of the Horses](#)

On the day that the horses were due to be delivered, Siva converted all the local jackals into horses and herded them towards Madurai. Siva and his entourage disguised themselves as horse traders in order to deliver the horses personally. When the king was informed that the promised horses had arrived, he released Manikkavachagar from prison and restored him to his former position. The king, after rewarding Siva by presenting him with a very valuable silk cloth, embroidered with gold, ordered his experts to examine the horses. They all pronounced themselves satisfied with them.

Later that evening, after Siva had handed over the horses and departed, all the horses turned back into jackals, which terrorised the city. Then, the numbers of jackals multiplied until there were millions of them, all of which attacked the people and the animals of Madurai. Shortly after the king had been informed of this latest development, Siva made all the jackals disappear. The king arrested Manikkavachagar again and resumed the former punishment of making him stand outside all day in the hot sun. The chapter ends with Manikkavachagar again appealing to Siva for help.



[Chapter Four: The Navvy](#)

Siva responded by causing the Vaigai River to flood Madurai. When the king's prayers to make the flood subside went unheeded, he asked his advisors if there was anything he had done that might be the cause of this catastrophe. The ministers advised releasing Manikkavachagar from prison, and the king agreed, saying that he too had been thinking of this remedy. When Manikkavachagar was brought before him, the king apologised and asked him to solve the flooding problem. Manikkavachagar prayed to Siva, and Siva responded by making the flood waters subside. In order to prevent subsequent floods, Manikkavachagar ordered an embankment to be built. All the citizens of the city were allocated a portion of the river bank and were told to construct an earthen barrier that would prevent future floods.

An elderly woman called Vanti was too feeble to do her allotted work. She appealed to Siva, saying that she could not find any able-bodied workers to help her. Siva decided to appear before her in the form of a worker and do her work for her. When he appeared, Vanti offered him sweet rice cakes as payment, and Siva agreed to take the job. However, once Siva began to do the work, he performed in a very erratic manner, and very little of the work

actually got done.

Manikkavachagar asked his subordinates to inspect the river bank to make sure that all the work was being done properly. When one of these inspectors discovered that Siva's section had not been done properly, he was dragged off to the next person up in the chain of command. This overseer struck Siva with a stick as a punishment for not working properly, but when the stick fell on Siva's back, he vanished into thin air, and simultaneously everyone in the world and in the heavens felt the pain of the blow at the same time.

As the overseers rushed to Manikkavachagar to tell him about this latest development, Manikkavachagar immediately understood what had happened. He went to the spot where Siva had manifested and lamented that he had been unable to have Siva's *darshan* while he was working on the dam. While Manikkavachagar was expressing these sentiments, Siva caused the Vaigai River to dry up completely.

The king finally realised that all these events had just been a divine sport of Siva. He summoned Manikkavachagar and apologised for having treated him so badly. He offered to reinstate him in his old job, but Manikkavachagar declined, saying that he preferred to be with Siva. He left Madurai and went back to Perunturai, where he found Siva and his devotees sitting under the same tree.

Siva informed Manikkavachagar that he would return to Kailas alone, and that everyone there should stay on earth for some more time. He told them that they should stay near the kuruntham tree, worshipping him, until a great fire appeared in a nearby sacred tank. When this occurred they should all jump into the fire.

As Siva began to walk away, Manikkavachagar followed him. Siva told him that when the fire appeared in the tank he should not jump into it along with the other devotees. He should instead go to various famous Siva shrines. He was promised that in each place he would have a vision of Siva. Manikkavachagar was also told that it was his destiny to vanquish a Buddhist scholar in a debate in Chidambaram, after which he could rejoin Siva.



[Chapter Five: The Divine Hall](#)

When Manikkavachagar queried these instructions Siva told him that he would obtain his final deliverance in Chidambaram where the latter performs his cosmic dance. Siva then gave him a brief lecture on the meaning and significance of the cosmic dance. When Siva departed, Manikkavachagar rejoined the celestial beings who were worshipping Siva under the kuruntham tree. While he was there he composed some of the hymns that appear in the *Tiruvachakam*. After a few days, as Siva had predicted, a large fire appeared in the nearby tank. All the devotees of Siva, except for Manikkavachagar, jumped into it, chanting Siva's name. The celestial beings who had taken on the form of earthly devotees resumed their usual heavenly form when they emerged from the fire and rejoined Siva. As they emerged Siva explained to them that he had asked them to remain on earth a little longer to lessen the pains of separation that Manikkavachagar was feeling. He added that the fire had been necessary to burn up any contamination that might have occurred as a result of their brief visit to the world of men.

Manikkavachagar started meditating under a tree and had a vision in which he saw all that Siva had done on his visits to Madurai and Perunturai, and all the deeds that Manikkavachagar himself was destined to do in the future. When he resumed his usual consciousness, he composed several more *Tiruvachakam* hymns. He then followed Siva's instructions and began to visit all the shrines he had been asked to go to. He continued to compose *Tiruvachakam* hymns, and in each place he visited he had a vision of Siva. His pilgrimage ended in the temple of Chidambaram where Siva appeared to him yet again. When he had visited all the places in Chidambaram associated with Siva and his devotees, and after composing several more *Tiruvachakam* hymns, he settled in a small hut on the outskirts of the city.



[Chapter Six: The Victory over the Buddhists in Debate](#)

The chapter begins with a devotee of Siva going to Sri Lanka and singing the praises of Chidambaram and its Golden Hall where Siva resides. The king of Sri Lanka heard about him and summoned him to appear in his court. The *sadhu* went and gave a speech to the king in which he extolled the greatness of Chidambaram. A Buddhist scholar who was present became angry and said that he would travel to Chidambaram, convert all the Saivas there and install a statue of the Buddha in the temple. The king, who had a daughter who was dumb, decided to travel to Chidambaram as well in the hope that she might be cured there.

On their arrival, the Buddhist scholar challenged the devotees of Siva to a debate, saying that he would defeat them in argument and prove that their beliefs were wrong. His challenge was accepted and it was agreed that the debate would take place in the presence of the two kings.

On the night before the debate Siva appeared in the dreams of all the temple priests and told them that they should go to Manikkavachagar's hut and ask him to be their representative in the debate. Manikkavachagar agreed to come the next day and refute the Buddhist's arguments. When the debate got under way both the Buddhist scholar and Manikkavachagar severely criticised and ridiculed the other's point of view.

At one point Manikkavachagar grew angry with what he said were the lies coming out of the Buddhist's mouth. He called on Saraswati, the goddess of speech, to leave the Buddhist's tongue so that he could no longer utter any falsehoods. When Saraswati complied with this request, the scholar and his associates were all struck dumb. The Sri Lankan king, impressed by this performance, prostrated before Manikkavachagar and informed him that his own daughter was dumb. He added that if Manikkavachagar could cure her, he himself would convert and become a Saiva.

Manikkavachagar called the daughter and asked her to give a public refutation of all the arguments that the Buddhist scholar had propounded. The daughter obliged and, speaking for the first time in her life, gave an erudite lecture that refuted the Buddhist position. The king, overjoyed, became a Saiva and requested Manikkavachagar to cure the dumbness of the Buddhist scholars. Manikkavachagar obliged, and the Buddhists, after acknowledging their erroneous views, also converted to Saivism.



[Chapter Seven: The Gaining of the Divine Feet](#)

The final chapter begins with Manikkavachagar living in

Chidambaram, singing the remaining hymns of the *Tiruvachakam*. Siva then took the form of a learned brahmin and came to Manikkavachagar's hut. He told Manikkavachagar that he had come to learn the *Tiruvachakam* hymns from him and asked Manikkavachagar to recite them all while he wrote down the words. When Manikkavachagar had completed his recitation, and Siva had written everything down, Siva asked him to compose another work, the *Tirukovai*, which would express the journey towards Siva in the form of a poem whose superficial theme was the love between man and woman. Manikkavachagar composed this second work on the spot, and Siva wrote it all down. Siva disappeared, taking the poems with him. Manikkavachagar then realised that it was Siva himself who had come to make a record of his poems. Siva, meanwhile, took the poems to his heavenly realm and read them out to all the assembled gods. At the end of *Tirukovai* he wrote: 'This work, spoken aloud by the true devotee Vadavurar [Manikkavachagar], is written in the hand of him who dances in the Golden Hall.'

Siva then placed the whole manuscript on the steps outside the inner shrine of the Chidambaram Temple, where it was found the next day when the priests unlocked the temple and went in to perform their morning rituals. They realised immediately that Siva had left this manuscript there for them to read. They went through the work, and when the end was reached, they read the portion in which Siva stated that he had recorded Manikkavachagar's words.

The people of Chidambaram all came to Manikkavachagar's house and asked him to narrate all the stories that dealt with Siva's intervention in his life. Manikkavachagar told them the full story. Then they asked him to explain the inner significance of the poems that Siva had written down. Manikkavachagar agreed to do so in the Golden Hall itself. When he entered the Golden Hall, with all the devotees crowding around, he pointed to Siva and said, 'He alone is the meaning of all the words'. Manikkavachagar then vanished and never reappeared. This was his final union with Siva's feet.

(1) In the *Periyapuranam*, which chronicles the lives of sixty-three of these Saiva *bhaktas*, at least thirty were non-brahmins, and one was an outcaste.

(2) *Hymns to the Dancing Siva* by Glen Yocum, 1982 ed., p. 40. Adi-Sankaracharya, who taught in South India in the ninth century, successfully vanquished the Jains and the Buddhists in philosophical debates, but at the grass-roots level it was the singing saints who reconverted the masses back to Hinduism.

(3) I am aware that many competent scholars will disagree with some or all of these dates. In my defence I will say that I have taken them from K. V. Zvelebil's *Handbook of Tamil Literature*, which is now widely regarded as being the most accurate and reliable chronicle of Tamil literary history.

(4) Verses 2, 4, 6 and 8 of *patikam* 99 from the fifth *Tirumurai*, translated by F. Kingsbury and G. E. Philips in *Hymns of the Tamil Saints*, 1921, p. 57. Though the translation is a loose one, its lilting rhyming style captures the spirit of the original.

Prabhulinga Leelai

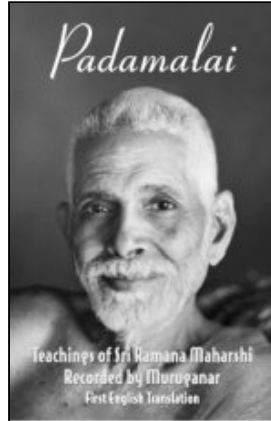
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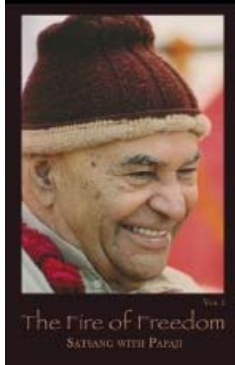
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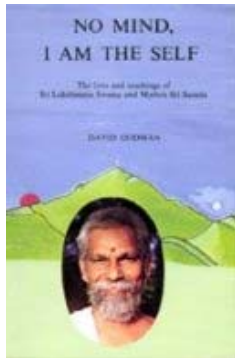
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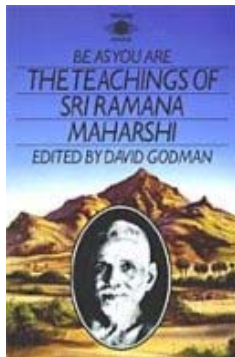
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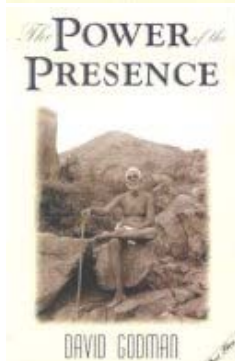
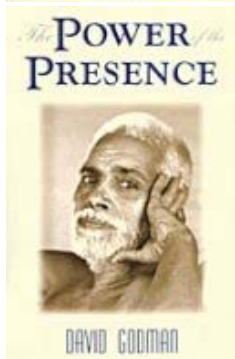
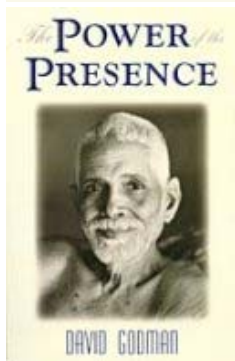
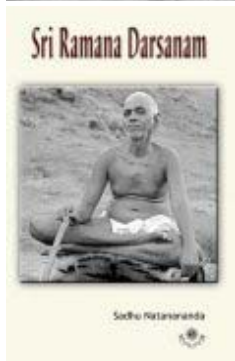
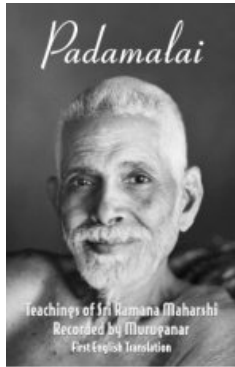
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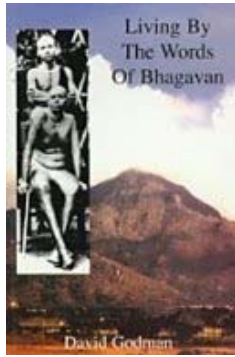
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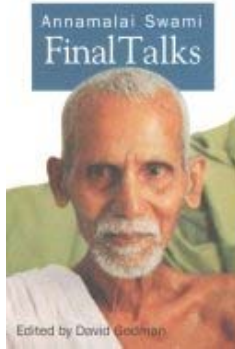
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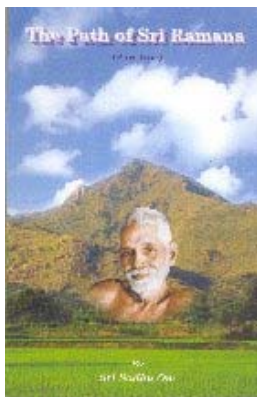
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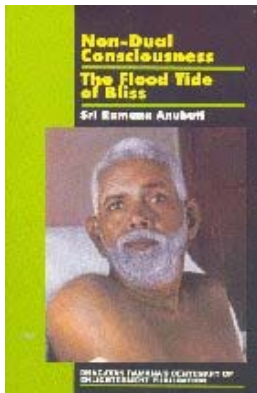
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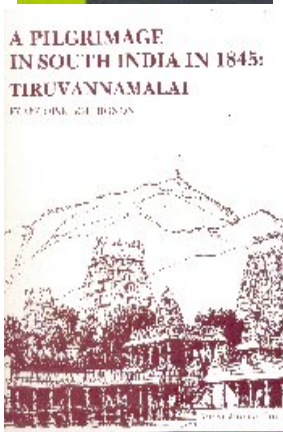
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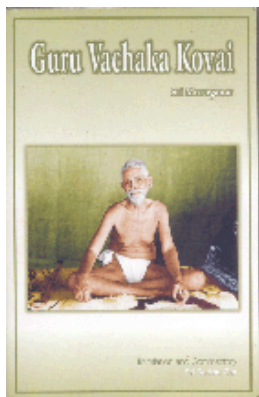


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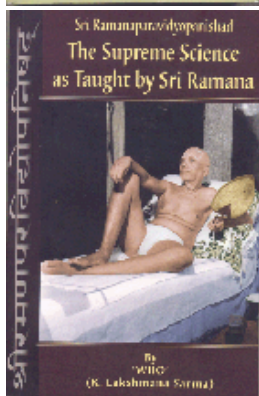
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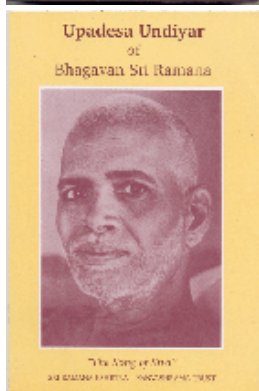


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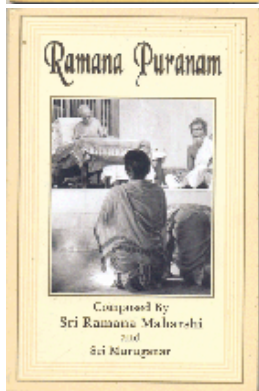


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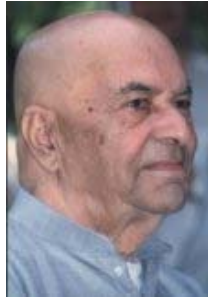
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Me and sea lion, Boston aquarium, 1999

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